IF I DIE BEFORE I WAKE

The Better Off Dead Series Volume 4

TALES OF NIGHTMARE CREATURES

EDITED BY R.E. SARGENT AND STEVEN PAJAK

Foreword by Bram Stoker Nominated Author JEFF STRAND

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Sinister Smile Press

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The Better Off Dead Series Volume 4
Tales of Nightmare Creatures

Edited by R.E. Sargent & Steven Pajak

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“Parents don’t tell children that nightmare creatures exist to create fear amongst them. They tell them to teach them that nightmare creatures can be slain.”

-Author unknown

FOREWORD

JEFF STRAND

WHEN I WAS ASKED TO write the foreword to *If I Die Before I Wake: The Better Off Dead Series Volume 4: Tales of Nightmare Creatures*, I declined, explaining that I was too busy. The reply was polite and understanding, but there was also something…*off* about it. Something foreboding. “No problem at all!” didn’t seem to actually mean “No problem at all!” I felt as if I might have made a terrible, terrible mistake, but I tried not to let it worry me.

My phone began to ring in the middle of the night. I’d answer and a voice would say, “Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to bother you when you’re *too busy*!” This would be followed by three or four minutes of maniacal laughter, and then some coughing, and then more laughter. I didn’t want to be rude and hang up, so I just sat in bed, drenched in terror-sweat as I listened.

I began to sleep with a fully loaded chainsaw by my bed. You probably think I mean fully *fueled* chainsaw, but no, this is a chainsaw that shoots smaller chainsaws. It doesn't work very well, but it always gets the reaction of "Whoa, is that seriously a chainsaw that shoots smaller chainsaws?" which gives me time to flee.

Weeks passed. I jumped at every noise. My hair began to fall out. I couldn't even enjoy the six hours of soap opera reruns from the 1970's I watched every day, and I wished I hadn't lied about being too busy to write the foreword. I considered saying that I'd changed my mind, but I didn't want the crew at Sinister Smile Press to think I was wishy-washy.

One night, as expected, a half-dozen people in animal masks broke into my mansion, threw me into the trunk of a car, and drove me to an undisclosed location. I was frightened, but I was able to get some sleep since they weren't waking me up with phone calls.

I awoke on a cement floor. The walls and ceiling were also cement, but I wasn't sleeping on them. Bones—so very many bones—were piled high in a corner.

And there stood Steven Pajak and R.E. Sargent, the editors of *If I Die Before I Wake: The Better Off Dead Series Volume 4: Tales of Nightmare Creatures*. They gave me sinister smiles.

"You should have agreed to write the foreword for *If I Die Before I Wake: The Better Off Dead Series Volume 4: Tales of Nightmare Creatures*," said Steven.

"Where did all those bones come from?" I asked.

"Why, those are the remains of other authors who declined to write the foreword for *If I Die Before I Wake: The Better Off Dead Series Volume 4: Tales of Nightmare Creatures*," said R.E.

"I was that far down the list? There's, like, the equivalent of thirty or forty skeletons in that pile."

"I wanted you to be the nineteenth person we asked," said Steven. "R.E. is the one who didn't think you were the right guy for the job."

"Liar!" screamed R.E. For a moment, I thought they were going to battle to the death, allowing me to escape, but instead they reconciled, hugged it out, and returned their attention to me.

"You *will* read these stories, and you *will* write the foreword, or you *will* join the others in the pile o' bones," said Steven.

“I’ll do it!” I said, tears streaming down my face. “God damn you both to hell, I’ll do it!”

They led me out of the room and into an endless hallway. The stories in this very anthology were written in blood on the walls. Now, this isn’t all that short of a book. I had to admit that I was impressed not only by the quantity of blood this would’ve required, but by the labor involved, and their ability to make the words legible. Try it sometime. Writing in blood on cement walls is a pain in the ass. It works pretty well if you’re just trying to write “Beware!” or something, but an entire story? It quickly becomes an illegible mess. I honestly don’t know how they made it work.

I read the stories. As I did so, I wondered if Scotty Milder, Elana Gomel, Hannah O’Doom, Scott Harper, Bridgett Nelson, Brian Asman, Sandra Stephens, Henry Herz, Red Lagoe, Frank Beghin, Kevin M. Folliard, and Matthew R. Davis had signed off on the idea that I’d be reading their stories in blood. I told myself that at least Bridgett Nelson would’ve said, “Hey, guys, this really isn’t cool,” if she’d known of my plight. But I don’t know this for sure. The authors in this anthology may very well be the nightmare creatures they write about.

I wrote the foreword, and the editors rejected it, saying it wasn’t quite what they were looking for. They wheeled out the dreaded Skeletonizer 3000, but when they’d kidnapped me they’d foolishly forgotten to check to see if I was carrying my chainsaw gun, and I was able to fend them off. I threatened to burn the whole place down, and they pointed out that cement doesn’t catch fire very well, so I settled for escaping.

The following night, they captured me again. I thought I’d locked the door this time, but apparently not. Hopefully they’ll approve this version of the foreword.

Look, we all have to make our own moral choices. If you’re okay with the idea that the publisher of this book abducted an innocent author and locked him in a bone-filled cement room, then enjoy. Otherwise, please demand your money back and explain that this is *not* the proper way to go about the publishing business.

A MORE THAN CANINE HUNGER

Scotty Milder

From the Denver Post:

Fort Collins - Police remain baffled following the brutal murder of three family members in a home just outside the tiny mountain community of Drake yesterday.

“I’m not gonna sugar coat it,” State Police Spokeswoman Carolyn McMartin told reporters during this afternoon’s press conference. “This is a bad one. A real bad one…”

SHAUNY BABY—HE hated that name, but at seven, he was old enough to understand that he was pretty much stuck with it, thanks to Jack—trudged up the hill behind his house, pulling his sled behind him. It was red and plastic and still had the Wal-Mart sticker on the underside. Shauny Baby knew that **a)** Dad got it as sort of an apology, and **b)** it was cheap because Dad wasn't actually sorry.

The snow was still freshly fallen and pristine, but the sun worked at it through the morning, turning what was loose powder an hour ago into something heavy and wet. It formed a crust that bit through Shauny Baby's snow pants with every step. By the time he was halfway up the hill, his thighs were screaming. His mood had gone sour, and now he wished he just stayed inside and let Mom make him some cocoa while he thumbed through one of Jack's old X-Men comics. But climbing the hill then attacking it with the sled had become a duty for him, a great mission, akin to storming the beach at Normandy like in that one movie he wasn't supposed to have watched (Jack always let Shauny Baby choose whenever he got stuck babysitting, so long as Shauny Baby kept his mouth shut later). If he turned back now, the cocoa would taste like defeat. It would taste like "Letting Mom Win."

He wished there was someone with him, though. He was alone, because Mom was busy grading her papers and Mellie had a cold that Mom was afraid would turn into pneumonia. So, he went to Jack—which just showed how desperate he was, because doing things like going sledding with Jack never ended up being any fun. It would start out okay, but then Jack would

let the big brother part take over, and he'd always end up pushing Shauny Baby down the hill or rubbing his face in the snow until he cried. Shauny Baby would threaten to tell Mom, and Jack would tell him to stop being such a little Shauny Baby.

But it didn't matter anyway, because this time Jack said no. Jack was working on a science fair project, something to do with magnets, and he wanted to finish before dinner. The project wasn't even due until next week, but that didn't matter to Jack. Jack actually liked school.

Shauny Baby used to like school, too. Now he hated it. When it started snowing last night, he'd allowed himself a glimmer of hope. At first it came down slow, but by the time Shauny Baby was ready for bed, it sheeted out of the black like ash from a volcano. He sat by his bedroom window, feeling the glimmer open up into a full spotlight as he watched the big flakes accumulate against the side of the house. They were already as high as his head.

"I know what you're thinking," Dad said, startling him into a little scream. Shauny Baby whipped around to where Dad stood in the bedroom doorway, propped against the jam and silhouetted all spooky against the hall light.

"Don't get your hopes up, kiddo," Dad said.

"But there's so much—"

Dad laughed. "Yeah, but this is northern Colorado. They don't just close the schools for any old snowstorm."

Except, for once, Dad was wrong and Shauny Baby was right. The snow didn't stop, and it was still coming down hard by the time Shauny Baby finished his breakfast this morning. No school today, which would have been great news except Mom got the day off, too. She taught freshman English at CSU in Fort Collins, which was almost an hour down the mountain. The school was still open, Shauny Baby heard her telling Dad earlier, because the shriveled old dicks in the school's administration were total assholes. But the road from Drake was closed. She had to email all her lecture notes to her T.A.

"Why do you have to go to work, Dad?" Shauny Baby asked as his dad squeezed into his snow boots.

Dad laughed. "Because old people get even sicker when it's cold. Let me tell you the hardest lesson in life, kiddo: you do a job that matters, they

don’t give you snow days.” Dad was Supervising Nurse at the retirement home in Estes Park. Usually, if one of the roads was gonna close, it would have been that one. But the way this storm just sat out on the Plains and refused to march west made everything all screwy.

“Careful,” Mom told Dad as he went out the door. “I heard on the radio that two cars ended up in the Big Thompson.”

“That was on your side,” Dad said and gave Shauny Baby the grin that said he was gonna say something naughty. “I looked online. Thirty-four into Estes Park is clear as a virgin’s—”

“David!”

Dad winked at Shauny Baby and went out the door.

“If the road into Estes Park is open,” Jack whined, “why’d they have to close the school?”

“Because a lot of the teachers come up from Fort Collins,” Mom said, although the way she didn’t look at Jack made Shauny Baby think she didn’t actually know and was just making that up.

Later, Shauny Baby asked Jack what happened to the cars that went into the Big Thompson. Jack looked at him solemnly over the top of his glasses. “Black ice,” he said and didn’t elaborate.

Now, as Shauny Baby plodded up the hill, limping a little now and with his side screaming along with his thighs, he pondered that. Black ice. Could ice be black? What would make it black? Was it, like, evil ice? It called to mind a ridiculous image of dark little ice trolls spreading their bad-ice troll dust all across the road, giggling and rubbing their hands together as they waited for some unsuspecting car to happen along. It seemed like something out of a crappy horror movie. Shauny Baby wondered if Jack was lying.

The problem with Mom being home instead of Dad was she made Shauny Baby do all his homework before she let him go outside—the multiplication tables and his spelling worksheet—and then insisted he help her with the dishes, take out the trash, and clean his room. If Dad had been there instead of her, he’d be racing Shauny Baby up the hill right now. He knew how to make the best of a snow day. Mom just used it up by being Mom.

It’s her Puritan work ethic, Dad said once when Shauny Baby complained. Shauny Baby didn’t know what that meant, but to him it

sounded like some sort of disease. Or a tumor. He knew all about tumors after his friend Mike's aunt got one in her belly. It made her get really skinny and lose her hair.

Thinking about Mike made him sad, and on the heels of that, he found himself getting angry all over again. He looked down at the lame Wal-Mart sled that was a sort of apology. What it really said was make the best of it, kiddo. Mike was in Fort Collins, where Shauny Baby lived until just before the start of the school year. But then, Dad, who worked at what Shauny Baby thought of as the Big Hospital, got offered this new job in Estes Park. It paid twice as much and had better hours, he said. That didn't mean anything to Shauny Baby. He expected Mom to say no way, José, the way she did whenever Shauny Baby pestered her for a new toy or PS4 game. Instead, Mom nodded and said she always wanted to get out of the city and up into the mountains and, no, she wouldn't mind commuting in to teach since she only had to go three days a week during the fall semester. Drake was the closest to a halfway point, and since it was actually a little closer to Estes Park, it just made sense to put the kids into the Estes Park school district. Which meant Mike and Davey and Tyrese were gone and Shauny Baby had all these new blank faces staring at him on the first day. These blank, mean, stupid faces.

No one asked Shauny Baby what he wanted.

No one ever asked.

If Mike was here, they'd be pulling the sled up the hill together. Mike would be prattling on about the Broncos and how this year was gonna be their year, they were gonna take it all the way as long as this new rookie quarterback didn't screw it up in the playoffs, and Shauny Baby (except he was Shaun to Mike, always just Shaun) would say no way, the Patriots were gonna dominate like they always did, the Patriots were the best team in the game by far, which would get Mike all red-faced and sputtery. Shauny Baby didn't actually care much about football and understood it even less, but pretending to be a Patriots fan was his favorite pastime because it got Mike so riled up.

They'd get to the top and then rock-paper-scissors who sat in front and who sat in back. If Shaun was in front, Mike would be thumping his shoulders all the way to the bottom of the hill.

There was no one like Mike (or Davey, or Tyrese) in Estes Park. Just all those mean, stupid, blank faces. One kid—Shauny Baby thought his name was Scott—tripped him in the hall on his first day. No reason. Just because Shauny Baby was the new kid.

"It'll get better," Dad said. "Take my word for it, kiddo." Which was just what Dad always said when he didn't have an answer.

"You've got Zoom," Mom said when Shauny Baby told her he missed his friends. "And you've got the PS4." Which was true. But Shauny Baby understood—without quite being able to articulate it—the relentless nature of time. They'd all four Zoom for a while and get online to play *Minecraft* and *LEGO Star Wars*. But then, eventually, it would just…stop. Because pretty soon, he'd just be a face on a screen to them, a voice in their headset, and then less than that, he'd be some guy they used to know.

And he'd be stuck up here in these stupid mountains. Going to school with all those blank, stupid faces.

"Don't worry," Dad said, with all the cluelessness about such things that only adults possessed. "You'll make friends eventually."

But Shauny Baby didn't want to make friends. Not with these kids.

And now his snow day was almost over. He'd be lucky if he got two good runs in before the sun dipped behind the looming peaks and it got too cold and dark. And it wasn't much fun anyway. He had to do it all alone since Mike was practically on the other side of the world, Mellie was sick, and stupid Jack wanted to work on his magnets.

By the time Shauny Baby got to the top, he felt like crying. The mountains stared down at him, hard, faceless, and unforgiving. He turned away from them and looked back the way he came.

His breath caught.

He had to admit the view was really pretty.

There was the old ranch house Dad bought "for a song" from some old lady who wanted to retire to Florida. It was two stories, painted a deep, brick red with gleaming white trim. It nestled amongst a stand of aspens in the middle of a big, snow-covered field. The field stretched all the way down to the river and the highway beyond. An open, rocky valley cut through to the right. Thick pines flanked the hill and farmhouse to the left. More mountains lifted on the other side, scraping at the sky with their

snow-capped teeth. The sky churned with fat gray clouds. The dwindling sun peaked through, painting everything in rose and gold.

Shauny Baby stood there, listening to the wind and the drone of far-off cars and a distant yap yap yap that had to be Buddy, Mom's twelve-year-old cocker spaniel. Buddy was deaf and mostly blind, and a lot of the time he just sat there in the kitchen barking at nothing. Shauny Baby thought it was funny, but it seemed to make Mom sad.

Yap yap yap, Buddy said.

Whooooooosh, the wind said.

Vruuuuuuummmmmm, the cars said.

For just one second, Shauny Baby forgot about Mike and the stupid blank faces in his new school.

For just one second, it seemed like there might be potential in this place.

For just one second, it felt like all of this was his.

Quick, before the feeling could dissipate, Shauny Baby dropped the sled and threw himself onto it, stomach first. He punched right through the crust. The snow underneath was sticky powder, and at first, the sled didn't want to move. Shauny Baby wriggled, inching it forward, until his weight and the hill's slope overcame the snow's sullen resistance.

The wind rose to a howl, burying the sound of the cars and the barking dog. It grabbed at his face, scratching at him like a hundred tiny fingers. But the adrenaline rose inside him and, with it, the euphoria of speed. There was a jagged moment of fear when he realized how steep the hill actually was, how long, and how far away the house was from its base. He pushed himself up onto his elbows and let out a yipping war cry, bashing the fear away.

As if in response, a man strode out of the pines.

FROM THE BLOG, LET'S TALK MURDER, PEOPLE!:

…And what is there to say about what happened to the Briscoe family in the little hamlet of Drake, Colorado, two winters ago? I actually drove through there last summer on my way from Wichita to see my sister up in Oregon, and I'd be lying to Y'all Faithful Readers if I said I didn't go to the house. It's tucked back from Highway 43 on this narrow, winding track called Storm Mountain Road. It's been sitting abandoned since the murders, and it looks it (see the pictures below).

Let me tell Y'all Faithful Readers, I haven't been so creeped out by a place since I poked around the Murder Mansion in Los Feliz. Bad vibes, my dear friends. BAAAAD vibes.

So, what do we know? We know that the mother (Theresa Briscoe) was found dead in the kitchen. The older, fourteen-year-old son (Jonathan, although everything I've read suggests the family called him Jack) was found in the upstairs bathroom. The nine-year-old daughter (Melissa) was found in her bed.

They were all found by David Briscoe when he got home from work that night. Can you imagine? Jesus. I don't think there's enough therapy on the planet to put your mind right after walking in on something like that.

I won't go into ALL the gory details, but I'll go into a few because this is Let's Talk About Murder, People! and I do what I want. I've seen the crime scene photos, and they're nothing you want to look at if you'd like to stay out of therapy yourself (but here's the link, if you're fucked up like me). There are still some folks who insist it wasn't a murder at all, but

rather some bizarre animal attack. And it's true that sometimes bears or cougars break into people's houses and kill them. I remember reading about one such case in New Mexico back in the early 2000s. A black bear crawled in through a ninety-three-year-old woman's window and fucking ATE HER. Just like the Briscoes. Here's the link to that story.

So, is it possible? I guess.

But…really?

All three of them? And all throughout the house?

Come on. I think Y'all Faithful Readers can smell the bear shit, so to speak. Right?

And let's not forget the youngest son (Shaun). No trace of either him or Buddy, the family's cocker spaniel, has ever been found.

Poor Buddy…

AT FIRST IT WAS JUST A FLUTTER OF MOVEMENT, SOMETHING BLACK MOVING in Shauny Baby's peripheral vision. He thought it was a raven, maybe, or a dog that got loose from Old Man Messiger's place up the road.

Squinting against the rush of wind, he glanced to his left and saw that it wasn't a dog or a raven or anything else, but a man striding out of the trees. There was something funny about his gait, but the way the sled bounced and jostled down the hill made it hard to see clearly.

After what seemed like an hour, Shauny Baby crunched to a stop at the bottom. The wind died to a soft purr. Buddy was still barking. The cars still

rumbled along way down at the bottom of the valley.

And now there was something new.

This singing.

Shauny Baby rolled off the sled and tried to get to his feet. He wanted to run back to the house. But the snow grabbed at him and weighed him down. He took two steps and flopped onto his belly.

The singing coalesced into words, high and lunatic.

“Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie!” the man screamed. “These words came low and mournfully!”

The man’s walk—stiff-legged and lurching—might have been funny in any other context. But the sheer, uncanny wrongness of it caused that sharp crust of fear to cut into Shauny Baby again. Only now it was a dagger, and it pierced him right in his heart.

The man staggered across the snow, his arms swinging wildly, his legs chugging forward without bending at the knee. Shauny Baby remembered that movie with Tom Hanks—one of the ones he was allowed to watch—where he was a little kid wearing leg braces. This was a little like that.

“From the pallid lips of the youth who lay! On his dying bed at the end of the day!”

The man had maybe halved the distance from the woods to where Shauny Baby lay in the snow. Now Shauny Baby could see his clothes: ragged black jeans and a long black coat flapping around him like broken wings. His hair—wispy, white—spiked up from a forehead the color of old milk.

And Shauny Baby could smell him, too. It was like last year, when the mouse died in the walls of their house in Fort Collins.

“Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie!” the man shrieked. “Where the wild coyotes will howl o’er me!”

Shauny Baby looked frantically toward the house. *Mom will hear*, he thought. *Or Jack. They’ll hear and they’ll come outside.*

But it was like he and this man were caught in a little pocket of spacetime all their own, separated from the rest of the universe by some invisible and unknowable membrane. And Shauny Baby couldn’t move. The fear and the cold had turned him to stone. Or maybe it was the man’s braying voice. It lanced into him like an electric shock.

Except now the man had stopped singing. His voice subsided to a rattle of chunky, wet gasps. It was like listening to the rhythmic thud of a cement mixer. Shauny Baby closed his eyes and listened to the man's boots crunch through the snow toward him.

Finally, the footsteps stopped. Shauny Baby felt the man looming above, still panting, his presence somehow cold instead of hot. Shauny Baby's muscles startled back to life. He began to tremble.

"I'm sorry, kiddo. I scare you?"

It was that word—kiddo, Dad's word—that made Shauny Baby roll over and look up. The man stood above him, his legs long and spindly, his arms jutting out to the side like branches off a tree. The sun was on the other side of the valley, should have been shining right on him, but for some reason, Shauny Baby still couldn't quite see his face.

"Don't be scared," the man said in a voice that sounded like tape being pulled off a strip of cardboard. And then he giggled. "I have something wonderful to show you."

"I don't want to see it," Shauny Baby said.

The man giggled again. He knelt, knees crackling like twigs.

"Oh, but you do," the man sing-songed madly. "You really, really do."

Shauny Baby managed to push himself into a sitting position. He turned to the man, who was finally at his own level, and gasped.

It was Mr. Barnett, who owned the little store up in Glen Haven. Shauny Baby had been there only half a dozen times with Dad, who mostly insisted on doing all their grocery shopping at the Kroger in Estes Park. "The place is cute," Dad said to Mom once, "but the old buzzard who owns it charges way too much." Except Mr. Barnett didn't seem like an old buzzard to Shauny Baby. He seemed like a nice guy, always laughing and joking with Shauny Baby about the Patriots (Shauny wore his cap in there the first time). He let Shauny Baby take his pick out of the big licorice jar that sat by the old-fashioned register, told Shauny Baby he'd have to come back in the spring to get some bait and a pole. "Make sure your pa here takes you fishin' in the Big Thompson," he told Shauny Baby with a wink. "You won't be proper mountain kid until you've pulled your own trout out of the water and eaten it for your dinner."

Hadn't Shauny Baby heard something about Mr. Barnett just a week ago? Something about him getting lost in the woods?

But maybe, now that Shauny Baby looked close, this wasn't Mr. Barnett after all. He had the same calloused hook of a nose, the same wire-brush eyebrows. Except Mr. Barnett was fat, and this guy was almost skeletally thin. The wax-white skin pulled tight across his skull, sunk in around the cheeks, and turned the bones into razors. It hung in a loose wattle from his chin. Shauny Baby saw the man's collarbone jutting from beneath the jacket. He knew, if the man lifted his shirt, Shauny Baby would be able to see all his ribs.

And his eyes. Mr. Barnett's eyes were blue. This man…the eyes were set way back in the skull, all the skin around them purple like a bruise and networked with lines, and it was like the pupils had swallowed up all the color, leaving the barest corona of white.

And there was something way deep inside that blackness. Something that moved.

"You sure you don't want to see it?" the man asked in that same, terrible sing-song voice. "It really is wonderful."

"I…I don't…"

The man laughed, showing great slabs of teeth that jutted from thin, gray gums. His lips were cracked and oozing something yellowish, and the air that exploded out of him smelled of old, dry death. Shauny Baby gagged and tried to pull away. The man's arm speared out. A bony hand gripped Shauny Baby's shoulder, yanked him close.

"It came down from the sky," the man wheezed and leaned in to kissing distance. Those eyes held Shauny Baby, pinned him writhing like a bug. "It came from the sky, and at first I thought it was a star, but what it really was…it was a tunnel—"

Shauny Baby burst into tears.

"—a tunnel made of meat," the man continued, ignoring him. "And that's when it showed me, it showed me, it showed me that everything, everything, everything is meat. It's all meat, and it's all for the taking. Do you understand…Shaun?"

Shauny Baby shook his head and sputtered.

"I'll show you," the man said and took his claw from Shauny Baby's shoulder. The relief was short lived, though, because then he seized Shauny Baby by the chin and squeezed until Shauny Baby's mouth popped open. Shauny Baby squawked and tried to wriggle away.

The man leaned in. His jaws unhinged, opened up like a crocodile, and he exhaled. His breath was wet. It wriggled down Shauny Baby's throat like a bundle of worms.

The man let go. Shauny Baby collapsed to his side, retching into the snow.

"You'll see," the man said and stood. He looked toward the house. "How many?"

"W…what?"

"How many are in there? Don't lie to me, Shaun. I can smell them."

"M…Mom. And Mellie. And Jack."

The man nodded.

"Good. That's good," he said. "You wait right here for me. Wait and look for the tunnel."

He turned and lurched toward the house.

"In a narrow grave just six by three! We buried him there on the lone prairie!"

FROM THE BLOG, LET'S TALK MURDER, PEOPLE! (COMMENTS SECTION):

lovelylady873: I looked at the pictures. I wish I didn't, but one thing I can say is that it was for sure NOT a bear.

happylibtard: are u a scientist? because I dont know why we're suppose to believe u

lovelylady873: No, I’m just not stupid. I have common sense. If it was a polar bear MAYBE. But we’re talking Colorado. They don’t even have grizzlies anymore. The average American black bear is 500 pounds MAX. It’s not going to eat three people—including a fourteen yr old kid and a GROWN ASS WOMAN—and leave nothing but gnawed up pieces.

JakeyJake: I think it was Donald Trump lol

happylibtard: no way! everone knows the only politicians who eat babies are commies like bernie sanders :D

Iamthedarkness999: Why is nobody saying what we’re all thinging. It was a Fucking Wendigo.

lovelylady873: THIS^^^

JakeyJake: Donald Trump is a wendigo lol?

SHAUNY BABY SAT THERE IN THE SNOW, AS THE SKY WENT FROM GOLD TO purple behind the clouds and the sun slinked off behind the mountains.

He sat there through all the screaming. All the breaking glass. At one point, Buddy came shooting out of the living room window and streaked across the field: no yapping now, just a silent dart of gold against the endless, unbroken white. Shauny Baby watched him disappear up the hill and into the pines. He’d never seen the dog run so fast in his life.

Later, he thought he heard Jack crying. It was a slurpy sound, full of blood.

The clouds thickened with the night, and then the snow began to fall. But Shauny Baby wasn't cold. And he wasn't afraid. Instead, the anger that had been with him since the day they left Fort Collins opened up and bloomed like a poison flower. It grew into him, sank its roots and twisted itself into an incandescent rage.

He thought of Mom with all her rules, Dad with all his jokes, Jack with his atomic wedgies and Indian rug burns, even Mellie with that sweet "who me?" smile she never seemed to lose. He thought of Mike and his Broncos, Mr. Barnett and his licorice whips. Mostly he thought of all those stupid, blank, mean faces.

All of them were meat.

And he was hungry.

The thing that emerged from the house—just as the last little bit of sun disappeared and the wind picked up into a gale—didn't look so much like Mr. Barnett anymore. It was twelve feet tall and bone white, except where it was spattered in blood. It was so thin it looked like a bundle of bleached sticks haphazardly lashed together.

Its face was all black eyes and a wide, red mouth.

The wind whispered to Shauny Baby, and what it said was meat.

The cars droned down on the highway, and what they said was meat.

Headlights washed the hill, creeping up Storm Mountain Road. It caught the creature in its beam, threw its insectile frame into silhouette. Shauny Baby remembered Dad standing in his bedroom doorway last night, backlit by the hallway light. The memory held no power for him. It was like a faded bit of film strip jumping in the projector.

The creature plodded toward him.

Shauny Baby closed his eyes and waited. He listened to the Jeep engine (meat). Dad was home (meat). The tires crunched across snow (meat). The car door went ker-THUNK (meat).

Shauny Baby began to hum.

And, as the creature scooped him up into its bony arms and carried him toward the hill, he saw the tunnel.

THE ALARABI

Elana Gomel

I STILL CANNOT ACCEPT THAT I failed.

I dream of a procession of women bowed down by their burdens, slowly wending their way out of the ruined gate, the jeering of the soldiers dying down as they realize what they are seeing. The bundles on the women's backs are bigger than the women themselves, but they advance with tiny steps, muscles bulging, faces red with exertion, fingers knotted.

And then one of them stumbles and drops her load.

I wake up, and I reach over to Jason's side of the bed where he is not.

THE HOUSE STOOD IN THE FLAT EXPANSE OF THE CENTRAL VALLEY surrounded by tawny fields of stubble and soaking up sunshine. The house came with heat, dry air, and flies. It came with tight-lipped farmers and signs proclaiming the End Times. It came with long drives and a big, faded sky. But after the foggy cold of San Francisco and a tiny rental that ate up all of our savings, it felt like paradise. Working online finally liberated us from the urban dystopia, and I was ready to accept all of the inconvenient addenda of rural life. Except for the truck.

When we opened the garage, we saw the truck sitting there like a toad. At the time, I told myself that Mr. Lew, the previous owner, just wanted to palm off this derelict upon his clueless buyers, figuring it would be more expensive to drive it to the dump. He did not do it out of malice. He could have never guessed the reason I hated the truck the moment I saw it. The reason belonged in the locked-up compartment in my mind where tales told in an old language mingled with discarded memories.

That first night, we could not settle. We prowled through the house, making discoveries: a forgotten family photo in the closet; a tattered quilt made for a baby; a dull kitchen knife. We ate pizza on the floor and made love on a sleeping bag.

When I woke up, sunlight streaming through the open window, Jason was not there. I found him in the garage, poking around the truck.

“We’ll probably need to pay somebody to take it off our hands,” I said.

“It has gas. I tried to drive it,” Jason said. “Useless. But I don’t see what’s wrong with it except it’s full of junk.”

The truck stared at me malevolently with its cataract headlights.

“It’s old,” I said with disgust.

“Practically an antique. A Ford-100. Probably late seventies.”

“We don’t need it.”

Our new Subaru Forrester winked at us with its pristine paintwork, inviting us to take a ride to the nearest outpost of civilization which would be Dos Palos, pop. 100.

“But Ros…”

“No,” I said. “I hate this thing. My grandmother used to drive one.”

In fact, I was not sure that the juddering tin-can Amona had driven was anything like this one. They had different models in Europe at the time. But the smell was the same: the stink of rust, rubbish, and age.

I turned my back upon the truck, suddenly feeling vulnerable, dressed only in an oversized t-shirt with an encierro print. There were no prying eyes to spy on me, but if the truck could speak, I imagined it rebuking me for being indecent, saying things about my mother and me: words like whiplashes.

“Earth to Ros?” That was Jason. “Castles in Spain?”

I winced.

I was not born in a Spanish castle but in Hospital Universitario De Navarra in Pamplona and christened Rosario Maritxu. I did not use either of these names anymore. I was Ros Gray, wife of Jason Gray of Columbus, Ohio.

“Look what I found in the truck,” he said, handing me a photograph.

I looked. And looked.

At first, it reminded me of the photographs of farmers from the Spanish Civil War: faces as cragged as the unforgiving soil that drunk their blood. And then I realized it was something much worse.

I pulled Jason back into the house, away from that damned truck, and showed him the photograph we had found yesterday. We lay the two pictures side by side on the scrubbed floor, our furniture still imprisoned in the movers’ van.

Both photographs showed the same three people: a man, a woman, and a child. The colors were faded, and the clothes seemed to indicate the seventies. In the first picture, the one we had found in the closet, they stood in front of a barn; the man’s arm was around the woman’s shoulder and the

child—a boy—nested between them. Just an ordinary, average American family: the solid dad, the dumpy mom, the freckled kid, all showcasing, with their slightly forced smiles, the miracles of US orthodontics.

In the second photo, they stood apart and if it were not for the background, I would not believe they were the same people. But the barn was identical, and the woman even wore the same blue t-shirt as in the first picture. But now, it clung tightly to the random protrusions of her gnarly body. It was not simply that she had gained weight. Rather, it appeared that she had somehow become incredibly massive, layered with random muscles that did not belong to her—perhaps did not belong to any human body. Her arms were mismatched: one bulging like a bodybuilder's, the other thin and bony, looking longer than it was anatomically possible. Her husband and son had undergone a similar, though not as drastic, transformation: the man's shoulders drooping in folds of flab over his elongated forearms; the boy thin to the point of emaciation, his ribcage visible through his shirt. But their faces were the worst.

"Acromegaly," I whispered.

"What?"

"It's a disease caused by excessive growth hormone. Gigantism, distorted facial features, large extremities…"

But even as I said it, I was doubting my own diagnosis. I am a medical data processor, not a doctor. Still, I knew acromegaly was pretty rare. Three cases in the same family? At the same time?

I looked at the boy's face and shuddered. His lower jaw was slack, hanging almost to his chest, and there was something fat and unwieldy in his mouth like an overgrown slug.

"Well, well, well…" Jason drawled. "So, we have a genuine mystery in our farmhouse!"

His voice was bubbling with enthusiasm. My husband loved fantasy novels and horror movies. I hated both. They were too close to fairy tales for comfort.

Fortunately, the movers arrived just then.

By evening, we were exhausted. I took a shower, and we cuddled in our newly assembled bed.

"So, bye-bye cities," Jason whispered in my ear. "Are you happy, Ros?"

"I'm always happy when I'm with you," I said and meant it.

"But you didn't like that truck. Why?"

Jason was mildly curious about my past, though he never pushed, content with the crumbs of information I was willing to drop.

"I told you. Amona used to drive one just like it."

"Didn't your grandmother bring you up?"

I had never talked to Jason about my childhood except for sharing the necessary information required for my citizenship application. But now, I suddenly decided it was time. We were starting anew, weren't we? And that required getting rid of the old rubbish.

"She did. And she did the best she could. Only her best involved telling me stories. Fairy tales, myths, legends. The Basque country is soaked in the past: thousands of years' worth of stories. She wanted to pass on her heritage. Our heritage. But I hated them. Horrible tales filled with monsters. I begged for a nightlight because the Alarabi was going to get me, but she refused. I still don't like sleeping in the dark alone."

"Lucky me, then." Jason smirked and snuggled even closer. "Still, not a single fairy tale you liked?"

"There was one." I smiled, remembering it. "There was a besieged city, about to fall into the enemy's hands. You know, at the time it meant everybody would be slaughtered: men, women, children. But the general of

the besieging army was in a good mood, so he decided that he would spare the women and grant them safe passage out of the city He would even let them carry their most valuable possessions with them. When a chain of women filed out of the city gate, each was carrying her husband piggyback on her shoulders."

"Wow! What a story!"

Jason was an American, unencumbered by the darkness of history, and I loved him for that. Later on, when he drifted into sleep, I listened to the cicada-humming night and thought about the tale. I did not tell him it was based on real events. I found out later that it had taken place in Germany, though Amona insisted it had been in Pamplona, our city. I could almost hear her raspy smoker's voice as she praised the wives' unswerving loyalty. Did she mean it as a lesson to me? If so, I failed at the exam.

But she herself, she had been loyal to me. Did she love me? Probably not. She despised her daughter, a *puta*, a good-for-nothing alcoholic, and she resented me, the reminder of my mother's shame, an unknown John's baby. But she had me fed and clothed. I had a place to live, and she made sure I did my homework. And every night, she told me fairy tales filled with monsters, witches, and ogres. Afterward, I would stand at the window of my small bedroom, watching the lights of the city and praying for at least one of them to shine all through the night. As long as lights were on, I believed, Amona's monsters could not get me. They were creatures of darkness. The same darkness that claimed her as she was lying in the cancer ward, waiting for a visit from her granddaughter that never came.

I nested closer to my husband's warm body and drifted to sleep, his breathing keeping the nightmares away.

THE NEXT MORNING, JASON DISAPPEARED AFTER BREAKFAST, TELLING ME HE was going to “check things out” in the garage. I held out for a while but after loading the dishwasher followed him there.

At first, I didn’t see him, but then I noticed his legs sticking out of the cabin like a giant insect’s antennae. He was rummaging through the accumulations of junk in the footwell.

“There is a lot of stuff here,” his muffled voice floated back. “A lot! I don’t understand how…”

His words tapered off as he squeezed deeper under the bench seat. I frowned. The truck was big but not that big; and Jason was not a short man. I grabbed his foot, irrationally afraid that it would come off in my hand.

“Give me my phone!”

I handed him his phone, which lay on the hood. He turned on the flashlight and illuminated the cavity under the seat.

It was much longer than I expected—much longer than it had any right to be. It looked like there was a tunnel under that seat, narrowing down precipitously in defiance of laws of perspective. I felt dizzy squinting into it over Jason’s shoulder.

The floor of the truck was littered with torn papers, scrunched-up food wrappers, old Coke bottles, even swatches of fabric. I poked the compacted layer of rubbish and felt a tickling at the back of my hand. Something dusty-soft wrapped itself around my wrist. I cried out in disgust, shaking it off. It fell onto the floor, unwinding like a snake.

“Ros! Come here, take a look!”

I could not speak, could not take my eyes off the thing.

It was a long braid of grey hair, covered with dust bunnies, and plaited with a faded red ribbon.

I had refused go to my grandmother's funeral, but my temporarily sober mother suddenly resurfaced and forced me to come. I was only twelve. In the church, I kept my eyes screwed shut but when my mother practically dragged me to the open casket, I caught a glimpse of the grey gaunt face and bald head.

My grandmother had been proud of her long thick hair. She had asked me to make sure she was buried "whole."

When we came back to the apartment, my mother painfully clutching my hand as if unsure of my reality, I saw my grandmother's steely grey braid woven with a red ribbon lying on her bed like a snake. I screamed, and my mother tried to calm me down with offers of cake and then calmed herself down with a bottle of cheap Rioja. Next morning, she was gone again, never to come back, and I passed into the tender embrace of Social Services.

My grandmother, resentful and betrayed, was left lying alone in the darkness of the grave. *Amonaren etxea*. Grandmother's house.

"Ros!"

I came back to the present with a start. The door of the truck gaped open, swaying on the creaky hinges. Jason was nowhere to be seen.

"Jas!" I yelled.

"Ros! Come here!"

His voice was petering out, as if he were moving away from me. I could see through the empty cabin onto the other side of the garage. The siding on the opposite wall was splattered with red paint.

"Jason! Where are you?"

Silence.

How could a grown man have vanished inside a stationary truck? It made no sense.

No more than finding the braid did.

I SEARCHED THE TRUCK, TOSSING OUT THE ACCUMULATED RUBBISH, swearing in English, Spanish, and Basque, my hands covered in filth, my face itching from sweat and dust. I went through every inch of that damned garage. I even peered under the seats of our new car.

Jason had vanished into thin air.

No, he had vanished into the truck. Somewhere, somehow, there was a door leading to that dark place where monsters were lying in wait. The land of fairy tales. *Amonaren etxea*.

But why did it have to happen to Jason? He was pure, untainted by my heritage, brought up in the sunny forgetfulness of the New World. He had nothing to do with the Alarabi.

Of all the monsters in my grandmother's considerable repertoire, the Alarabi was the worst: the blood-splattered ogre, gnawing bones in its stinking cave. She described it to me in great details, reveling in every moment of my abject terror. Later, to dispel the evil enchantment of that tale, I did some research, finding out only that the Alarabi was known under other names as well: Tartalo, Torto, even Cyclops, as in Greek mythology. When I saw a picture of a hunched-up shape with hanging jaws, clutching a bone in its clawed hand, I had to rush out of the library and throw up on the pavement outside.

I went back to the house. The photos we had found lay on the table. I studied them. The bodies of the family looked jiggly somehow, like half-baked dough. The distorted architecture of their skeletons poked through the tortured flesh.

I called the previous owner. No answer.

I knew I was just postponing the inevitable. I had to go back to the truck. To sit in the front seat. To put my hands on the steering wheel that my grandmother's veined hands had touched.

At this point, I did not care that Amona's truck had been processed into scrap metal long ago, in a country far away. Fairy tales have their own space and time.

I could not do it. But what was the alternative? Perhaps I should call 911, declare my husband missing? They would suspect me, for sure, but so what? What was the worst that could happen? I was a green-card holder; could they deport me? Back to Pamplona, to the city where my grandmother was buried.

Alone in the dark, again. Without my husband.

I went to the garage.

The steering wheel was warm and frizzy under my numb fingers. It felt as if it was covered in dandruff. Or was it the residue of the thing I had handled before clambering into the driver's seat?

I did not even know how to drive a manual transmission, but the keys were in the ignition, and the engine started with a sputtering sound. But as Jason had said, the truck did not move.

I jiggled the key, turned the engine off and on. Nothing.

Not true. There was something.

The back of the truck had been modified; the partition that separated the cabin from the bed had a hatch in it. It had been closed when I searched the truck. Now it was open. There was nothing behind it but thick, clotted darkness.

I climbed over the back of the seat and crawled through the hatch.

There was no vertigo, no sense of dislocation, no little-Dorothy-in-a-tornado kind of thing. Instead, I found myself in the dark. The surface under my hands and knees was clanking metal that suddenly gave way to gravel. Looking back, I could see a pale rectangle of the hatch, small and dim as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope.

I got up, expecting to hit my head on the ceiling. I did not.

And it was not quite dark. Even though the light from the garage had dwindled to nothing, there was some ambient illumination in the air, diluting the black to yellowish-grey. I could not see where it was coming

from. My senses warred with each other: my sight telling me I was outside, while my nose, clogged with the stink of rust and junk, insisted I was still inside the garage.

“Jas!” I yelled. My voice was swallowed up by emptiness. I gingerly stepped forward and slipped on something. I almost ended flat on my face, and the object clattered away from me.

It was a bone.

Above me, a feverish orange light dawned across the domed vault—too high for the ceiling, too low for the sky. The space I was in did not feel enclosed, but neither was it open-air—something in-between, a misbegotten hybrid of in and outdoors.

I stood on a gravel-covered field. Scattered among stones were ivory balls and yellow sticks like the remnants of some demented lawn croquet. It was a field of bones, an endless charnel-house. There was no sun or moon above me; the entire lowering dome dripped inflamed glow, strong enough to see what was in front of me, weak enough to smudge anything in the distance into a tangle of shadows.

Something detached itself from these shadows, moved toward me, a walking scarecrow in the harvest of bones. My scream was cut short when I recognized him.

“Jas!”

Jason was pale, his face and hands powdered with bone dust. We clung together for a long time.

“What is this place, Ros?” he whispered into my ear.

Like any immigrant married to a native, I relied on my husband to explain to me the rules of my new country. For the first time, our positions were reversed. I knew the geography of this place, having traversed it so many times in my nightmares.

“There is a house there,” Jason said. “Looks like ours.”

Amonaren etxea.

“That’s where the Alarabi lives,” I whispered.

“What?”

I realized I had said it in Basque, and suddenly, I was irrationally angry that he did not speak my language–the language I did not want to speak anymore.

The bones beneath my feet were human, though some appeared to be too large, as if belonging to giants. They were disarticulated, scattered around: femurs on top of humeri, phalanges poking from inside a skull. I lifted a femur and saw the unmistakable grooves and gauges of teeth. Something had gnawed upon it.

There was a rattling sound among the shadows.

The orange vault darkened, lightened, darkened again, flickering like a faulty light fixture. Behind us, a rattle, a clacking, and then a strange coughing sound, as if a throat the size of a world was trying to clear layers of sedimented phlegm.

I looked back, trying to find the hatch I came through, but there was no sign of it. Instead, something branching and dark: a tree of thorns, or maybe a tower of sticks or perhaps a gaunt mantis the size of a lighting-pole…but my brain shut down, no longer trying to make sense of anything and just pumping adrenaline into my shaking body.

A skull rolled away, grinning at me. Something moved, something impossibly big.

And more movement, closer to us. In the field of bones, scurrying and whispering, furtive movements, slow clicks, and louder clatter. The light was so bad now that I could not see what it was. Nor did I want to.

“We need to go to the house!” I yelled.

In my grandmother’s stories, the ones who tried to run away always got eaten.

I grabbed Jason’s hand, and we hurried forward. Something blocked our way, crawling like a large python.

It was not a python. It was an arm.

Or rather, the bones of an arm: a skeletal caterpillar, finger-walking on the dirt, and dragging the clacking humerus and ulna behind. But when these bones had been clothed with flesh, their owner must have been the size of a gantry. The arm was easily as long as I was tall.

Beside me, Jason gasped in pain. I looked at him. At first, I thought my eyes were deceiving me. The orange and scarlet dome pulsated overhead like a diseased Aurora Borealis, and his face was splotched with shadows. But the protrusions that pushed from under his skin, stretching it like fabric, were not shadows. The ridges forming around his eyes; the drooping jaw; the knobby knuckles…His body looked lumpy and lopsided.

Once I had seen a woman stung by a bee and going into an anaphylactic shock. Her flesh was rising like dough, drowning her features in the swelling tide. But it was not Jason's flesh that was swelling. It was his bones.

"Run!" I screamed and pulled him, stumbling, after me.

The bones that littered the floor were restless, shifting and slowly crawling over each other. I could also see that many of them were disproportionately large, others so distorted that they looked like paleontological finds rather than human remains. But they were human, no doubt about it. Human and thoroughly cleaned by the teeth of the creature that had split their joints and sucked the marrow out of them.

The farmhouse loomed in the scarlet murk. I urged Jason on, almost carrying him as he stumbled and groaned in the throes of whatever transformation was claiming him. A skull the size of a watermelon tried to sink its teeth into my shin but rolled away when I kicked back.

The farmhouse was infected with the same disease of gigantism as everything else here. It looked swollen like an elephantiasis patient, lopsided and distorted. The windows had shrunk to embrasures, the roof sagged. The lintel of the door now loomed above my head. I pushed the door; it swung open.

The living room was drowning in a thicket of moving shadows but one of them was denser and more substantial than the rest. It moved toward us.

The Alarabi was as big as Grandmother's tales had depicted it: a gnarled rough mass of fat and muscle and bone, all negligently wrapped up in the hide the color and consistency of brittle leather. Its face with its elongated asymmetrical jaw and tiny eyes was bestial and greedy. In one detail, though, the tales were wrong. The Alarabi was female.

Her empty dugs hung almost to her hips. She wore no clothing, and the slack pouch of her sex was plain to see. But there was no hair on her body, and her bald head shone dully in the bloody light.

I bowed deeply to the monster.

"Amona," I said. "I beg your forgiveness."

Her dull eyes were filled with the same detached patience I had seen in the eyes of Basque peasant women. My ancestors had tended their rocky blood-soaked fields as she was tending her field of bones, making them grow until they burst through their wrapping of flesh, distorting and

reshaping it. And then, obedient to her summons, the bones would come to her, carrying their helpless passenger—still alive, stretched on the rack of their own skeleton—to the lair of the witch. The witch who would eat your meat, and drink your blood, and suck out your marrow.

The Cyclops, the cannibal. The Alarabi, living in my grandmother's house.

"Grandmother," I said, "I failed in my duty. I should have brought your hair to you, so you would be buried whole. But my husband is innocent. Please let him go."

Something moved in those sunken eyeholes. A misshapen paw stretched toward me, meaty and thick, the size of my head. Its talons were horny and crooked; not quite claws, not quite nails.

I put the braid into the cupped palm.

The bulk of her shuddered. She stood up to her full height, towering above me like Amona used to tower above me when I was a child and she told me I was a *puta*'s daughter and had to be better than my mother.

To get to the garage, I needed to get by her. I draped Jason's arm over my shoulder and dragged him. He was barely conscious.

We squeezed by the creature, and her stench washed over me: smoke, and rust, and blood. But she did not touch us. She did not have to. When we entered the cavernous garage, our way was blocked by a barricade of bones. Giant femurs clashed together; skeletal hands waived above our heads like black palm-fronds; humeri wove a thicket on the grounds. Gigantic skulls rolled toward us, teeth gnashing and snipping. The witch's leftovers did not want to let us go.

"Jas!" I yelled in despair, but his only response was stertorous breathing.

The truck was there, and it looked unchanged. But the garage itself was thickly filled with what I thought at first were cobwebs until I realized it was hair: silky hair growing from the walls and the ceiling, waving like spider legs. I stopped.

The clacking noise followed us into the garage as a finger-bone as long as my forearm crept inside. Jason moaned.

Letting go of him, I parted the curtain of hair, sobbing in disgust. It caressed my face, insinuated itself into my nostrils, slithered down my throat…

But then I was inside the truck. The key was in the ignition. I turned it on. The engine sputtered and died. Again, and again…Finally, it caught; and the panel at the back lifted, letting in the golden daylight and the smell of dry heat.

Outside, something heavy dropped like a sack of potatoes. The clacking intensified as if a xylophone was being randomly banged upon by a band of unhinged players.

I jumped out of the truck. I could not see Jason. And then I saw a heap of animated bones, crawling over each other like agitated worms. I yelled and pulled them off, revealing my husband's unconscious body.

But he was still alive; I could see his chest rise and fall. Kicking the bones aside, I pulled him up, slinging his arm over my shoulders.

He was so heavy that my knees sagged, almost bringing both of us down to the bone-infested floor. I made one tiny step, then another. The truck loomed ahead, but instead of coming closer, it seemed to recede.

"Come on, come on!" I yelled at the insensate body that dragged me down. "Come on, damn you!"

And then a step as heavy as an earthquake made the garage tremble. The Alarabi was coming.

Jason's body slid off my shoulders, falling into the mass of clacking bones. A giant clawed paw reached out of the murk toward me.

I scrambled into the truck and crawled through the hatch onto its rusty bed.

So here I am, a widow in a lonely house. You can run away from your tales, but they will find you sooner or later.

I have gone through the hatch more times than I can count. I always end up crawling on my hands and knees on the unyielding metal of the truck-bed.

I still have the two pictures of the anonymous family. The best I can determine, they had owned the house before Mr. Lew. The truck may even have belonged to them. Mr. Lew may know more, but he is gone, and nobody knows where he is.

And what good would it do anyway? The Alarabi came for me.

Or did she? Maybe I am getting it all wrong. Maybe my nightmares did not follow me into this new land. Maybe the Alarabi is known as something else to everybody who tries to settle here, leaving behind the accumulated burden of history. After all, the Old World or New, Europe or America, we all share the same bones under the skin.

And so, I am hesitant to put the house on the market, to get rid of the truck, to move somewhere else. Maybe I can still find my way in, appease the monster, and bring my husband back. The tale of the women of the besieged city had been told so many times; surely, in one of those retellings, I will be out of the gate, staggering under the weight of my rescued husband’s body.

SCARECROW

Hannah O'Doom

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter." Emilee gripped the sides of the bathroom sink, trying to slow her breathing. She had run up the long driveway from the bus, trying to get to a place where she could hide with her humiliation.

"It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter," she chanted quietly. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to ignore the images flashing before her mind's eyes. A pair of her panties, stolen out of her gym bag, flapping outside the bus window. Everyone laughing. The jeering: "I think they are slowing us down! Is that a parachute?"

Paris and Sharon and Alice…why did they live to make her miserable?

"I don't matter, I don't matter, I don't matter…" Emilee didn't notice the change in the chant. She opened her eyes and looked into the mirror. Her hair was a mess, and her face was red and blotchy. Snot ran down from her nose and onto her lips. She wiped them on her sleeve.

Slowly, she let go of the sink and sat down on the edge of the tub. She pulled her bookbag to her feet and opened it, rummaging to the bottom. She pulled out a little pink makeup case, unzipped it, and let out a long, slow breath.

Carefully, Emilee picked out a new razor blade from the pack and laid it on her knee. She pulled out three large bandages and a tube of first aid ointment and set those on the tub beside her. She shimmied out of her clothes, down to her underwear, and looked at herself in the full-length mirror on the back of the door. She took stock: mousey hair, bad skin, braces, tiny breasts, round belly, chubby thighs, fat knees, cellulite, and scars. So many scars. Some big, some small. She ran her fingers across the tops of her thighs, which often took the brunt of her anger, and let her fingertips flirt with the rough edges of each scar. She picked up her razor blade and found a patch of untouched skin.

THE SUN BROKE THROUGH THE LACE DRAPES OVER EMILEE'S BED, DAPPLING the room with light. She had fallen asleep with her laptop open and on her bed, and it had fallen off at some point in the night. She had stayed up much too late reading the most recent comments on The Tea, an online message board that most everyone at her school used at one point or another. It was a stupid place…an online rumor mill, but a thread had been started about her.

She trudged to the bathroom, her little case in hand. She locked the door behind her and pulled down her pajama pants. Two large bandages were

nearly soaked through with blood. She carefully cleaned her wounds and changed the bandages. She then washed her face and brushed her teeth. When she was finished, she stared into the mirror, looking at her reflection.

A movement from behind her caused Emilee to spin around. She peered out the small window that faced the back yard. An azalea bush near the edge of the yard started to shake. Emilee pressed her face against the glass. Something darted out of the bush and into the woods. Whatever it was moved quickly, but it looked large enough to be a human. She shook her head and turned back around. She was obviously sleep deprived, she told herself.

EMILEE SLID INTO THE BOOTH IN THE BACK OF THE SHOP WITH HER COFFEE in one hand and a book in the other. She had spent most of the day at the library, helping sort and label books for an upcoming fundraiser. Her pay had been the chance to pick out one of them to take with her.

She curled her legs up beneath her and leaned against the overstuffed back of the booth. It was situated in the corner farthest from the counter, overlooking a park that led into the foggy woods that bordered the edges of town.

As she wriggled into her spot and opened her book, something caught her eye. There was movement along the edge of the park. Just like that morning, she saw a bush dancing back and forth. Something crawled out of it.

She leaned against the glass, pressing her nose against it to get a closer look. The thing was dark, and hairy. As it cleared the bush, it lifted up onto its hind legs. Its dark eyes glistened like black diamonds when the sunlight caught them. The creature raised one hand and bent a bony finger, beckoning her.

Emilee turned her head, looking to see if anyone else in the shop saw what she was seeing. It was mostly empty, and the baristas at the counter had their backs to her, huddled together, giggling and chatting.

She turned back and the thing was still there. Slowly Emilee put the book back into her bag and slid out of the booth, leaving the coffee untouched.

She darted across the road and into the park, slowing as she approached the wooded area. The being at the edge of the woods ducked into the bushes. Emilee stood frozen for a moment, deciding what to do.

“Hello?” she called out. She strained her ears, listening for a response. There was the faint sound of shuffling leaves and she followed it.

Stumbling along in no particular direction, she thought she must have surely lost her mind. But every time she thought she was going to give up, she heard the sound of something moving up ahead and forged forward.

She crossed a small stream and saw muddy prints on the bank. They looked less like feet and more like hooves. Emilee picked up the pace, scrambling up a small hill to get closer to it.

Over the hill was a clearing, and the creature was just on the edge of it.

“Hello?” Emilee called.

The creature turned and looked at her. It was covered in black, thick hair and was a little shorter than Emilee, but very muscular. Its face was elongated and the chin pointy with eyes. Hooves, instead of feet, burrowed into the ground where it stood.

“You have followed me to my home. I have been watching you. I can help you get what your heart achesssssss for most.” The creature hissed the words.

Emilee kept her distance, still at edge of the clearing.

“What are you?” she asked.

“I’m your desires personified. I’m the granter of wishes. I am your ssservant.” With that, the creature bowed low to the ground, never taking its

coal-black eyes off Emilee. A shiver ran down her spine, but she found herself stepping closer.

“Tell me what you most desssire,” the creature said.

Emilee froze in her tracks, her lips sealed tight. She could feel her throat tightening as if she were going to cry.

The creature leapt forward, meeting her at her feet. “Could it be that you desire beauty?”

Emilee automatically tugged at her sweater sleeves, pulling them farther down on her scarred wrists.

The creature smiled.

“That’sssss what I thought. I can help you with that.” It circled her, taking inventory of her appearance.

“I have to sssstart small, but the more I work, the more powerful I become.” The creature stopped in front of Emilee’s face. She could smell its breath, like something that had once been sweet but was now rotting. It reached out a hand, elongated fingers that curved into sharp claws brushing against her hair.

“Let’s sssstart here. Surely you want some other hair than this?”

Emilee touched her hair, carefully avoiding the clawed hand already in it. She thought of Cindy Lewis’ deep red, curly locks and how many times she had coveted her hair. Emilee’s was a faded brown, stick straight, thin and dull.

“I…I would like thicker hair. Red. Something that stands out,” Emilee said.

“Tell me, is there someone who has what you desire? Until my powers get stronger, I need an example.”

“Cindy Lewis.” Emilee blurted out the name. The creature let go of her hair and stepped backwards.

“Seeenddeeee Looooois,” it hissed. As it did, the creature kept backing away, out of the clearing and into the woods.

“Wait,” Emilee said. The creature didn’t stop, and moments later it was gone. Emilee stood, frozen, listening to the sound of shuffling leaves.

EMILEE DUCKED INTO A RESTROOM ON HER WAY TO HER NEXT CLASS TO catch a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She put her hand up to her hair and slid it across the shiny surface. It seemed thicker and wavy and just a hint of red and gold highlights in the normally mousey brown. She told herself it was impossible.

“Nice hair, Goldie Locks.”

Emilee could see Paris standing behind her in the mirror.

“What you do, get some extensions? Can’t get a face extension, though, can you?” Paris slid up beside Emilee, a smirk on her face.

“Or skin extensions at that,” Paris said, grabbing Emilee by the arm and yanking up her hoodie sleeve, exposing a fresh set of delicate cuts up and down her forearm. Emilee jerked her arm away, letting the sleeve fall back down.

“Get the hell off of her.”

Aurora, Emilee’s older sister, was standing in the doorway of the bathroom. Aurora was everything Emilee was not: pretty, outgoing, popular. She was a senior and practically the queen of the popular kids. Paris took two steps away from Emilee.

“We were just playing,” Paris said.

“Playing? Like you were playing when you kissed your cousin in eighth grade?”

Paris’ face turned a deep red, and she headed for the door. “We didn’t know we were related.”

“Just remember the next time you want to bother my sister that anything I share with my friends gets around school quick.”

Paris barged her way past Aurora. Emilee turned to Aurora.

“You really didn’t need to do that, you know,” she said.

“I was just helping you out. What was she saying about your skin?”

“I can fight my own battles. Besides, you’ll just make her worse.” Emilee pushed past her sister and darted down the hallway. She nearly knocked over Cindy Lewis, who was standing next to her locker, looking miserable.

“Watch it, weirdo,” Cindy said, snarling. Emilee had to blink hard to make sure she was seeing Cindy correctly. Her head was nearly shaved into a buzz cut, her long flowing hair gone.

“Stop staring. My stupid kid brother put glue in my hair while I was asleep,” Cindy said and shoved past Emilee with tears in her eyes. Emilee let out a low, shaky breath.

SHE WAS UNDER THE COVERS, HER LAPTOP OPEN, FLIPPING BACK AND FORTH between social media sites, looking at the posts on Cindy’s pages, when she heard tapping at her window.

Emilee pulled the covers away from her and turned her head slowly toward the sound.

“Emmmmmillleeeeee.”

Her stomach curled. She slid out of bed and walked to the window.

“Emmmmmmillleeeeeee. Let me in.”

With shaky hands, Emilee unlatched the locks on the window and slid it open a few inches.

“Go away,” she said. “I don’t want what you are offering.”

The creature contorted, flattening itself and reaching two long appendages through the window, pulling itself through.

Emilee took a step back from the creature as it reached out its long arm and stroked her hair. “So smooottthhhhh,” it hissed.

“Go away,” Emilee said. She could hear the lack of conviction in her own voice.

“What would you like next? How about a new ssssmile?”

Emilee’s hand automatically went to her mouth, touching her thin lips, and she could feel her front teeth that were a little too big underneath.

“I just need to get an idea of what you want. Focussss on what you want.” The creature circled around Emilee. She couldn’t help herself. She thought about all the pretty, popular girls at school with cherry red, perfect lips. Alice Gills. Even when she was smirking in a mean way, she did it with her brilliantly white teeth and perfect pout.

“Good. Yesssssssss.” The creature backed up from Emilee, its own smile a horrid sight of dark brown, mismatched teeth hanging from a gaping grin.

“Wait. I don’t wa—” Before Emilee could finish her thought, the creature had contorted itself again, sliding backward out of the window, keeping its terrible grin aimed at Emilee until the last possible second. Then it was gone.

"HONEY, YOU LOOK NICE TODAY!" EMILEE'S MOM HANDED HER THE COFFEE pot and turned to put a bagel in the toaster.

Emilee had braided her hair, both for the luxurious feeling of it, but also to hide just how long and thick it had grown in two days. She had applied some makeup, stealing her sister's softest pink lipstick, admiring her perfectly pouty mouth, and her front teeth, which she was certain protruded much less than the day before.

"Thanks, gotta run!" Emilee said, pouring herself a travel mug of coffee and rushing out the door. She could hear the bus rattling down the street toward them.

Aurora was at the end of the drive, pounding away at a text on her phone. As Emilee skidded to a stop next to her, Aurora glanced up. "Are you wearing my lipstick?" she asked.

Emilee stiffened. She should have asked but had been too embarrassed. "Yeah, so?"

"Cool. It looks good on you, kiddo."

The bus pulled up, and Aurora bounded up the steps, making her way to the back with all the cool kids. Emilee took her seat at the front behind the driver.

The bus was still relatively empty and the handful of kids in the back were so loud that their voices carried easily to the front.

"Smashed out all of her front teeth…"

"NO!"

"She'll have to have reconstructive surgery…"

“Poor Alice…”

Emilee’s head snapped up. She turned a little in her seat, trying to look casual while eavesdropping on her sister’s conversation.

“Dad talked to her mom last night. She told him the doc said it was a one in a million chance. Alice was just walking by the baseball field when a stray ball hit her right in the mouth. All of her front teeth are gone.”

Emilee slid down into her seat feeling dizzy. First Cindy and now Alice. She had unleashed the creature on them. Cindy, at least, wasn’t that bad. Hair could grow back. But this? Emilee took deep breaths. She thought about all the times Alice had stood behind Sharon and Paris, smirking while the other two tormented her. Maybe it was justice.

“Miss Emilee, are you feeling okay?” Mr. Todd, the bus driver, was looking at Emilee through the rearview mirror, his brow furrowed.

“Um, yeah. I’m okay, Mr. Todd,” Emilee said, pushing herself up and smiling back at him.

“Why, you look so nice today, Miss Emilee,” he said. Emilee’s smile grew larger.

EMILEE COULDN’T REMEMBER HOW SHE GOT BACK INTO THE WOODS. THE moon was full, so she had enough light to see the little path in front of her. She followed it deeper. She heard the sound of a creek babbling and made her way to it, walking along the bank, up a hill. In the distance, she saw a figure.

Emilee stopped in her tracks, her heart thudding in her chest. She finally got her feet working and moved forward.

The figure swayed back and forth from a low tree branch. It was crudely the shape of a person, made of twigs and branches, strapped together with rough twine. Upon its head was a crown of long red hair, attached with globs of glue. Where a mouth should be, several bloody teeth stuck out from the gaps between the interlocking twigs.

THE SOUND OF CHALK SQUAWKING AGAINST THE BOARD BROUGHT HER attention back to the present. Every other teacher had embraced technology. Only Ms. Mchone felt the need to use an actual blackboard.

“Ah, yes Miss Emilee,” Ms. Mchone said when she caught her eye.

“Um…”

“Apparently Miss Piggy wasn’t listening.”

Emilee’s face grew hot. Sharon wasn’t even trying to whisper. Several of the other students snickered.

“Maybe the answer is blowing in the wind. You know, like piggy’s panties,” Sharon stage whispered to everyone in the room. More students joined in the giggling.

“That’s ENOUGH. Maybe Sharon would like to answer the question since she seems to know so much,” Ms. Mchone said.

Emilee turned her head toward the window, away from her classmates, trying to hide her tear-filled eyes. A shadow moved across it. Emilee

blinked, clearing the tears. The shadow crossed again and then settled beneath the oak tree just visible from the window.

“Emileeeeeee. What do you wish for?” It was a hiss; a whisper in her head. She thought of Sharon, perfect with her tone, athletic body that had curves in all the right places. Emilee thought about her own chubby knees, poochy belly, and flat chest. What would it cost? What would it do to Sharon?

“Apologize to Emilee,” Ms. Mchone said.

“Sorry, piggy.” Sharon was looking at her, smirking as others giggled. Ms. Mchone sent her from the room, and Sharon sashayed out the door, unafraid of any real punishment.

I want my figure to look like that. I want my body to look like Sharon’s. Emilee closed her eyes and focused on Sharon’s figure in her mind. She opened her eyes and looked out the window. The creature was gone.

EVERY MORNING EMILEE WOKE UP AND HER PANTS FIT A LITTLE LOOSER, her shirts a little tighter in the chest. She eventually had to buy new clothes as she slimmed down and toned up, without having step foot in a gym.

About a month after Emilee had seen the creature outside the classroom window, Sharon stopped showing up at school.

“Hey Aurora, do you know what happened to Sharon?” Emilee asked one night at dinner.

“Her parents took her to some fancy specialist in Boston. She’s in the hospital. Apparently, she collapsed after cheerleading practice and never woke up. She’s been complaining about being weak lately. And, honestly, she’s been looking bad. I mean, she’s terrible and all, but I don’t wish anything bad on her.”

Aurora took a bite from her plate and looked out the window, looking truly saddened by the thought of someone else’s suffering. Emilee pushed her plate away and excused herself from the table.

“JUST BECAUSE YOU COLORED YOUR HAIR AND LOST A FEW POUNDS DOESN’T mean you’re not a freak.”

Paris was standing behind Emilee. Emilee had ducked into the bathroom between classes to catch a glimpse of herself in the mirror. More and more she had come to love her own reflection. She hadn’t taken out her blades in weeks.

Emilee pushed her glasses up from the bridge of her nose and spun around to face Paris. For a while, Paris had left her alone. But lately, Paris had refocused her animosity onto Emilee, after Chad Brounhill, one of the most popular boys in school, had started showing interest in Emilee.

“Paris, isn’t this whole game getting old?” Emilee said. “Are you afraid that I might take some of the spotlight away from you? Or are you jealous because Chad likes me?”

Paris sneered and then giggled. “Oh, honey. You poor, delusional thing. Chad was taking pity on you. How could he be into you when he asked me to the senior dance?”

Emilee’s stomach dropped. She thought back to all the times Chad had been around, seeming to be interested in her. Paris and a slew of cool kids always seemed nearby. They were making fun of her.

Paris stared at her, smirk still on her face. Emilee looked into Paris’ eyes. They were a deep blue that bordered on violet. A lot of kids thought she wore colored lenses; the color was so rare. Emilee didn’t hesitate. *I want her eyes*, she thought.

A shadow moved across the stall door behind Paris. For a second, Emilee was sure she saw feet move. The creature was there. It had been waiting for her next request.

“You know what? I guess we’ll just see in the end who the freak is,” Emilee said, brushing past Paris.

EMILEE RUSHED TO HER MIRROR AS SOON AS SHE WOKE UP. HER EYES WERE beautiful. The color was a soft violet and her lashes were thick and curled up. She looked like she had on eyeliner. She smiled and her perfect lips slid across her straight, white teeth. She sighed with satisfaction.

She dressed…a mini skirt, black tights, and a tight red sweater. She thought to herself that it was a shame that she couldn’t enjoy showing off her new body more. Too many scars. Still, this would do the trick. She still

needed a date to the dance and she wasn't going to waste her time on Chad anymore. She had her sights set on bigger fish: Tanner Thompson, star quarterback, and sure to be the Homecoming King.

There was no time for breakfast or coffee; she had spent too long putting on makeup and the bus was rumbling toward their house. Aurora was already standing outside, a book in hand. Emilee had always loved that, even though she was pretty and popular, her sister was an unabashed bookworm.

"You look pretty today," Aurora said.

"I'm feeling pretty," Emilee said. The bus pulled up, and Emilee followed her sister on and walked to the back with her. Aurora looked surprised but smiled at her as Emilee took a seat next to Tanner.

"Hi, Tanner," Emilee said. She leaned in, toward him.

"Uh, hi." Tanner looked at Emilee for a moment, a confused look on his face. Finally, a flash of recognition. "Oh, you're Aurora's kid sister, right?"

Emilee felt a pang of jealousy toward her sister and embarrassment at being so bold as to think Tanner would immediately know who she was. She leaned back in the seat. "Yeah," she said. "Is it okay if I sit here?"

He shrugged. "Sure. I mean, any kid sister of Aurora's is a friend of mine." He then turned sideways in the seat, away from her, so he could talk to the cooler kids behind them.

Emilee felt her cheeks flush red and slouched down into the seat, staring straight ahead.

As soon as the bus pulled into the school's lot, she was on her feet and out the door. She raced down the hall to the bathroom and ducked in. It was empty. She stared at herself in the mirror, and the feelings of inadequacy started to fade. Her hair flowed down her back, auburn with just a hint of wave. Her lips were plump and red. Her once greyish-brown eyes were now a stunning violet. She lifted her shoulders and stuck out her breasts, which had grown a full cup size over the past few weeks. She smiled at herself. Tanner had just been surprised at her actions, that was all. There was no way he couldn't think she was beautiful. She just had to get him to really look at her.

The bell rang, and Emilee realized that she was late for biology. She ran down the hall and then stopped with a skid, just outside the classroom door.

“Miss Porter, it’s ten after. You’re late.” Mr. Harris, the biology teacher looked genuinely surprised. Emilee knew she should apologize. He’d probably just let her off with a warning. But every set of eyes in class were on her.

“Thanks for the time, Big Ben,” she said. A few of the students in the front of the class looked at her like she had lost her mind, but the kids in the back, the cool kids, giggled.

Mr. Harris stared at her for a moment, stunned. Finally, he frowned. “Go to the principal’s office.”

Emilee rolled her eyes and muttered, “Lame.” She could see Tanner in the back of the room, looking at her intently. A trip to the principal’s office was totally worth it.

As she approached the central office, she walked past the main entrance and noticed a police cruiser parked outside.

“I’m here to see the principal,” she said as she pushed open the door to the main office. The school secretary, an older lady with impossibly yellow hair, looked up.

“He’s in a meeting. Take a seat and you can go in when he is finished,” she said. Emilee shrugged and sat in the wooden chair closest to the principal’s office door.

“I think you might want to bring in additional counselors for the students.” The voice was so booming that the door barely muffled it at all. Emilee leaned in a little closer to the door. The principal said something in response, but it was hard to make out.

“We will do our best to withhold the more gruesome details of the murder, but they will eventually leak. They always do,” the owner of the loud voice said.

“This is just so horrific,” the principal said. “Both eyes gone?”

Emilee felt faint.

“I’ll need to speak to her friends.”

Emilee slid out of the chair and onto her hands and knees. She felt like she was going to vomit.

“Emilee, are you okay?” the secretary asked. Emilee didn’t answer.

“I’m going to get you to the nurse’s office.”

EMILEE SKIPPED DINNER AND WENT DIRECTLY TO HER ROOM, SITTING ON HER bed scanning social media sites and message boards. Wild theories about Paris' grisly murder dominated the threads. The police officer had been right; the horrific details of her death and her missing eyes got out almost immediately.

At some point in the night, Emilee finally fell asleep, her laptop still on her chest.

She was back in the woods, on the hill. In the distance she could see the scarecrow figure she had seen before. She walked forward with dread rising in her throat.

The wild red hair attached to the head had tangled with debris and was dirty. The handful of bloody teeth were still sticking out where the mouth should be, dingy and brown. But now there were gobs of fat and muscle hanging from the arms and legs, intertwined with twigs and branches. Piercing into Emilee's soul were two violet-colored eyes, pushed into the scarecrow's face, impaled on tiny sticks.

The wind picked up, and in it she heard the creature. "Emillleeeeeeee, what do you wish?"

AFTER A FEW WEEKS, EMILEE FOUND HERSELF TAKEN IN BY THE POPULAR crowd. They needed fresh faces with the loss of the trinity of Paris, Alice, and Sharon.

The senior dance was coming up, and Emilee leaned against her locker, waiting for Tanner.

With her tormentors gone and her new looks, her life had become everything she had dreamed it could be. Almost everything.

“Hey, Tanner!” Emilee caught his eye as he walked down the hall, leading a group of football players.

“Oh, hey, Ems.”

Emilee blushed. She loved that he had given her a nickname.

“Do you have a sec? I just wanted to talk to you about something.” Emilee noticed a couple of the other guys snickering and one made a kissy noise. Tanner turned and punched the guy in the arm.

“Sure!” Tanner turned. “You all go on and I’ll meet up later,” he said, dismissing the group behind him.

“I was just wondering.” Emilee stopped, suddenly embarrassed. She thought about her perfect smile, her curvy figure, and shiny hair and became emboldened. “I was just wondering if you were planning on going to the senior dance?”

“Oh…yeah. I’ve already asked someone to go with me.” Tanner looked both apologetic and confused. The bell rang. “I better get going.”

Emilee watched in disbelief as Tanner walked away. Paris was gone. Who could he have asked out instead of Emilee?

EMILEE STARED AT HERSELF IN THE MIRROR. HER DRESS WAS SLINKY AND tight, flowing down to her ankles. The green sequins danced under the lights. She wore long matching gloves that went up over her elbows and met the dress sleeves, covering her arms entirely. It was as sexy as she could be without showing any actual skin. She thought about how she hadn't picked up a razor in weeks, running her fingers over the fabric of the dress.

There was a knock at her bedroom door.

"Come in," Emilee said, turning toward the door. Aurora opened the door and smiled a genuine, huge smile at her little sister.

"You look great, kiddo!" Aurora said. She was in a much shorter dress, a silver, wispy A-line thing that showed off her toned arms and shapely legs. Emilee felt a surge of jealousy but pushed it back down.

"Not too bad, yourself," Emilee said.

"Listen, I need to talk to you about my date tonight." Aurora crossed the room and sat down on her sister's bed. "I've been meaning to do this for a while, actually."

Emilee sat down next to her. After Tanner had turned her down, Emilee had settled on going with Chase Bordon. She wasn't at all interested in him, but he was a senior, and that got her a ticket to the dance. She was desperate to get into that dance and see just who it was Tanner was taking.

“I kno—” Aurora started to talk, but the sound of a motorcycle screeching into the driveway interrupted her. Aurora’s face went pale, and Emilee’s stomach dropped. She leaned over and saw Tanner through the window, complete in tux and leather biking jacket, walking toward the front door.

“How could you?” Emilee whispered, her back still to her sister.

“Ems, look, I—”

“Get out.” Emilee said to the window. She heard the doorbell ring.

“Let me—”

“I said get out!” Emilee turned on her heels, her voice a high-pitched screech. Aurora got off the bed and walked across the room, pausing at the door.

Emilee picked up a paperweight and heaved it toward her sister. Aurora ducked out of the room, and the weight hit the wall, denting the plaster.

Scorned by Tanner, betrayed by her sister, Emilee felt like an outcast again to the cool kids. She bet they would all be laughing behind her back. Then a thought flashed across her mind. If only she had clear, smooth skin like her sister, she could wear more revealing clothes and Tanner would have seen her for a woman instead of a child.

Something pecked against the window, and Emilee turned. A shadow moved across the glass, and a chill went down her spine. The creature had heard her thoughts.

“No!” Emilee yelled. She raced to the window and threw it open. “No, I didn’t mean it. I take it back!”

Emilee ran downstairs to stop Aurora from leaving the house. Her mom was standing in the living room entry.

“Where is she?” Emilee asked.

“Aurora? She just left for the dance. When should your date be arriving?”

Emilee froze, weighing her options. She thought about the scarecrow in her dream. Maybe if it was destroyed, she could stop the creature.

“I’m going to wait on the porch for Chase,” Emilee said, running through the door. A pair of her old tennis shoes were lying on the porch. She slid them on and took off running.

EMILEE STOPPED JUST ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BUSH THAT LED TO THE trail where she had first seen the creature. She put her hands on her knees and bent over, sucking in big gulps of air. It was nearly a two-mile run from her house. She had torn the side of her dress from the hem to her upper thigh to give her the maneuverability to run. Still, she was out of shape, not having worked for any of the muscles in her toned legs. Sweat beaded on her forehead.

“Go. Gogogo,” she said to her legs, willing them to keep moving.

She slogged forward, up the path toward the clearing where she had first met the creature and where she was certain the scarecrow would be.

“It’ssssss what you wanted.” The voice came from everywhere. It sounded like the wind in the trees. Emilee stopped and looked down at her legs. They were smooth and clean, not a single razor blade scar on them.

“No!” She pushed her sleeves up, revealing smooth, pristine skin. “Aurora!” she yelled and started to run forward again.

“Everything has a pricccccceeee,” the voice hissed, somewhere nearby.

“AURORA!” Emilee screamed again, picking up speed.

She lurched up the hill and into the clearing, tripping over a tree root and hitting the ground hard, knocking the breath out of her. As Emilee slowly rolled herself over onto her back, she saw it in the distance.

“Please. Pleasepleasepleaseno.” She whispered it, although if to herself, the creature, or just the universe, she wasn’t sure. As her breath came back to her, she flipped onto her hands and knees and lurched forward.

The scarecrow swayed in the wind. Cindy's bright hair still hung from the bumpy head, Sharon's once perfect teeth stuck out from the mouth, jutting in different directions and now brown from exposure and old blood. Paris' violet eyeballs, stuck onto the face, impaled through twigs, had begun to rot and ooze down the makeshift face. Muscle tissue missing from Alice hung limply on the arms and legs of the totem, looking more like rotting meat than something that came from a human.

Emilee heard something move behind her, and she spun around, trailing the beam of the flashlight toward the noise. Aurora stepped into the light.

"Emilee. Mom said you took off. I've been looking for you." Aurora's dress glittered in the beam of light, her face pale and her eyes wide as saucers.

"How did you know where to find me?" Emilee asked.

The creature oozed out of the darkness, creeping up behind Aurora. "Becausssse I told her," it whispered.

"Aurora, look out!" Emilee screamed, lunging for her sister. She dropped her flashlight, throwing everything into darkness. She heard a scream and a sickening tearing sound as a bright red light flashed before her.

The flashlight at her feet kicked backed on. In the weak beam of light, she saw a trail of something dark oozing toward her.

"Aurora!" Emilee picked up the flashlight with shaking hands, following the trail.

The light beam followed the trail and hit the edge of her sister's hand. Fingers were splayed out on the ground, unmoving. In the weak light, it was hard to tell what was wrong with them.

Emilee took a step forward and fell to her knees, putting her hand on her sister's arm. She started to shake her arm but froze as she felt the gummy exposed muscles and tendons. She pulled it back in revulsion, her own fingers sticky with blood.

The creature stood at Aurora's feet, grinning. Emilee shone the light onto its face, getting a good look at the stone black eyes and elongated head. Its mouth was a slit filled with razor-pointed teeth, curled up at the edges. "Everything has a pricccceeeee," it hissed.

Behind her, she heard the rustling of someone walking through leaves. She spun around to see the scarecrow, draped in bloody skin, hobbling

toward her.

“Sssssometimes, wishesssss can devour,” the creature said from behind. Emilee screamed as the scarecrow wrapped crunchy, twig-like fingers around her wrist and pulled her toward its bloody embrace.

ISMINI AND THE BLOOD OF THE BULLMAN

Scott Harper

“There is nothing permanent except change.”
—Heraclitus.

The thin, pale woman stood beside her mother, nearly hidden in the shadows of the dark and crowded cage, bodies pressed against the slick stone walls. The floor was wet with small pools of water and human waste, the stale air ripe with sweat and the stench of fear and misery. The mother kicked away a large rat that had ventured too close, apologizing to another woman when the rat went scurrying toward her.

“Ismini, where is your brother? Where is Talos?” Alcippe fretted, her eyes red from bouts of crying and lack of sleep. Their simple dresses were covered in dirt and filth.

Ismini shook her head in frustration; the soldiers from Crete had separated the young men from the old after the initial attack on their small

village. She did not know what had become of him. She moved away from the closest water pool, fearing that the others might note that the dirty liquid refused to replicate her image.

Like the rest of the people of their village, Ismini and Alcippe had been forced by the soldiers to trek for long miles in the hot afternoon sun. Some of the older men and women couldn't keep up and were left stranded on the roadside without food or water. The rest were directed into a cave opening at the base of Mirmingaris, the tallest peak on the island. They descended into a dark tunnel, passing dozens of decomposing, worm-infested corpses along the way—Ismini wondered how many poor souls had been condemned to a similar fate over time. Many of the prisoners began to gag and wretch at the horrid smell. Eventually, they were herded into a murky pen that appeared more suited for animals than humans, where they waited, hungry and exhausted, for further indignity to be heaped upon them.

Ismini gazed out through an opening in the grimy wooden slats at the surrounding torch-lit arena. An intimidating, scar-faced soldier of Crete guarded the pen, spear cradled in one hand, an iron xiphos blade hanging from a sling under the other, his eyes and mouth squinted in distaste as he looked with contempt at the prisoners. He spat on the ground near Ismini.

The huge underground arena was crowded, the curving polygonal stone tiers arranged so that the people in the rows above could see the action on the sand without their vision being obscured by the people beneath them. The seats were filled with a mixture of favored native Kythirans and conquering Crete attendees. The Kythirans, of course, were collaborators, traitors who had sold out their fellow islanders for promises of wealth and power under the incoming regime. They had used their positions of authority to aid Glaucus's invading army; the Crete soldiers had been allowed to land secretly—the shore guards having mysteriously not reported for duty that fateful night—and never faced any concentrated opposition.

The lowest section directly across from the pen accommodated the royalty, including the conquering King Glaucus. Despite the great distance between that section and the cage, Ismini's keen eyes showed her that he sat in majesty on a dais, dressed in a magnificent flowing blue robe, a crown of gold resting on the thick hair of his head. He was accompanied by his queen Sidonia, a former concubine whose abundant bedroom skills, honed to

perfection over years of practice, had infatuated the young king—so much so that he never allowed her to leave his side. Her visage betrayed, with every cruel look, the scorn she felt for the people of Kythira. A squad of the king's finest armored soldiers surrounded the royal couple, wearing shiny bronze cuirasses and helmets and armed with spears and swords.

A full moon shone through the open top of the theatron, an opening carved into the very ground of the island itself. Ismini thrilled to the touch of the moonlight as it pricked at her skin, the cold beams invigorating her in the oppressive heat. The sunlit march she had endured earlier had greatly taxed her strength.

She was impressed by the majestic scope of the theatron—if the rumors were to be believed, Glaucus had employed a nephew of the great architect Daedalus himself to construct it. It stood to reason that the stories were credible, given that Glaucus was a son of the late ruler of Crete, King Minos, the man who had previously commanded Daedalus's services toward the creation of the famed Labyrinth.

Trumpets roared, echoing off the stone walls and rousing nests of skittering bats to flight. Ismini saw one of Glaucus's chosen purple-robed toadies rise and bow to the king before addressing the crowd.

"Good people of Kythira, noble guests of Crete, witness the glory of the great King Glaucus, first son of Minos of Crete, as we spill blood tonight in honor of the great and benevolent god Poseidon, bearer of the Trident, so that our magnificent island may always stay in his favor! That the seas remain calm and teeming with fish! Great Poseidon, carry us on a gentle breeze and summon a favorable wind for us to follow as we begin the winter solstice!"

Ismini grimaced at the false piety of the toady's words. They rang hollow in the midst of so much man-made suffering.

The trumpets sounded again. A heavy metal gate underneath the royal section opened, and four haggard men walked forth, accompanied by jeers from the hostile crowd. The men were dressed only in loincloths, their slick, wet skin gleaming in the moonlight. Each was armed with a weapon—two carried traditional xiphos swords, one a double-headed labrys axe and the other a bronze mace. Their faces were grim, as if resigned to their fate. Ismini immediately recognized one of the countenances as her missing brother.

As the men moved to the center of the arena, Alcippe also recognized her son.

“Talos!” she shouted, pushing close to the cage. “Ismini, it’s your brother!”

“Yes, Mother,” Ismini mouthed, but her attention was focused on Talos. She recalled Glaucus’s soldiers breaking into their home in a lightning attack, killing her ailing father in his sleep. Talos had fought bravely in defense of his family, wounding the soldiers with his bare hands before falling to their superior numbers. Ismini also tried to fight, but the bright morning sun drained her strength. Soon they were all beaten and chained.

Their abductors didn’t give them time to mourn or to bury their dead. They were pushed at spear point into line with the other survivors. The ground was littered with the bodies of the dead. The village had not been taken easily—a score of bloody soldiers lay amongst the dead in mute testament to that fact. They were herded initially toward New Crete in the south, where the invading Glaucus had established his new capital some time ago—a port city specifically founded for trade and communication with his homeland, Crete. The soldiers then diverted the death march at Mirmingaris.

“What is that bastard Glaucus going to do to him?” Alcippe asked. Ismini remained silent, afraid to panic the older woman. She knew her mother’s question would soon be answered, and not in a manner to her liking. Glaucus was not a man of wit or study. The day-to-day grind of democratic politics was above his very modest intellectual capabilities. History was replete with the tragedies of such men thrust into power. Rather than govern, they sought to distract the mobs from the daily drudgery of life with games of violence.

They watched as a section of the arena ground lowered into the earth, sending dirt flying. As the dust settled, Ismini saw there was a dark opening leading into an underground tunnel. Thunderous footfalls augured the arrival of a massive being.

The toady addressed the audience and the king once more.

“The blood spilt tonight will sanctify this sand, making it holy ground! My lord, behold Poseidon’s vessel! Behold—the Minotaur!”

The bipedal creature that stomped up through the opening on wide black hooves was a terrifying composite of man and beast that could only have

been conceived in a lunatic's nightmare. It stood twice again as tall as a man, massive quadriceps muscles separated and flaring in slabs off its thick bones. The creature's upper torso was equally impressive, sectioned abdominal walls rising from a blood-stained leather loincloth before resting under dense pectorals. The wide shoulders and trapezius were covered in thick, coarse dark fur that flowed from the massive horned head of a bull. A tail danced in the air behind it.

The creature exhaled a fetid, wet snort through its black nostrils and stomped the ground, as if daring the men to attack. The arena echoed with the impact. All four men backed away from the bullman. Its slavering black lips curled up in a snarl, exposing sharp yellow teeth. Black predator eyes reflected the torchlight. It moved its huge head from side to side, taking in the entirety of the theatron. The Minotaur carried an enormous wooden club in its hands, a weapon the size of a man.

Ismini was stunned at the sight of the beast. The Crete King Minos had been rumored to have fathered at least one such monstrosity, but the beast had supposedly been defeated in a pitched battle with the Athenian hero Theseus. Either rumors of its death were greatly exaggerated, or Minos had fathered other such creatures. Ismini wondered if Glaucus considered the bullman to be his brother.

The creature bellowed in rage before launching itself at the men. The first man, a shorter fellow with a stocky frame and wavy hair, screamed in horror and bolted. The Minotaur quickly covered the distance in long strides, goring the man through the back on one of its horns. The horn was so long it traveled all the way through the man's torso and erupted from his sternum, tearing out a lung in the process. The bullman tossed the dying man back into the air with a flip of its muscular neck. The other men avoided the falling body, which hit the ground headfirst with a sickening snap.

The Minotaur walked over to the dead man, raised one of its hooves, and crushed his head in an explosion of blood and gore. It roared a victory cry, raising its hands overhead. The crowd shouted their approval.

Ismini breathed in the scent of fresh blood on the air, her tongue sliding over her sharp teeth. She was sickened at the crude, wanton waste of life that masqueraded as a form of religious sacrifice, but the darkness that had

infected her soul was attracted to the violence. The beast within her stirred—it was hungry.

She watched as Talos bravely attempted to lead the other men in a counterattack. Their father had possessed some skill with the blade, and he'd schooled Talos in the art before he'd become sick. Talos directed them to flank the beast to either side, while he faced it head on. Unfortunately, the men, both simple farmers, were undisciplined and didn't listen. The first man attacked prematurely and swung his axe into the beast's clavicle. The metal head bounced off without penetrating the skin.

The Minotaur snarled and lashed out with its fist, pulping the man's head like a ripe fruit. The corpse fell, brain matter scattering on the ground. The other man struck with his mace, smashing it into the bullman's back. The bronze blade shattered on impact. Still holding on to the useless hilt, the man looked up in terror as the Minotaur raised its own club high in the air and brought it down with prodigious force, shattering his sternum and driving broken bone into his heart.

The crowd roared at the man's death. Glaucus smiled and clapped his hands as his creature dug one hand into the man's bloody remains. It extracted a length of ropy intestine and slurped it down like a giant noodle. Alcippe began to cry again.

As Ismini looked on, Talos warily circled the creature. She was proud of her brother, at the courage he had shown. It was typical of him, the older brother who always defended her from street bullies and looked after her when she was sick. Close in age, they spent many afternoons running about the village and through the woods, fighting imaginary creatures, lost in their own childish world. Talos had even shown her in secret some of the martial skills their father had taught him. Ismini had proven to be an apt pupil.

But times had changed, and they were children no longer. Ismini resolved to defend Talos and claim vengeance on her father's murderers at all costs. And, unlike the other prisoners, she had the means to do so.

She had been reluctant to use her unique abilities since the night she was attacked. She had felt debased, a creature of darkness forced to hide in shadows and masquerade as a human woman.

She had returned home late one moonlit night from the market, bringing some fresh fish for the family. Her mother had warned her not to stay out so late, as Glaucus's soldiers were known to be violent and take liberties with

local women. And there were always whispered legends circulating of the ancient lamia, old wives' tales of female demons that roamed the night in search of blood.

A large sweaty soldier had set on her. She dropped the fish as he pulled her from the main roadway into a dark corner, one callused hand covering her mouth to prevent her from screaming. With his other he began to grope her, attempting to pull off her clothing. Her eyes teared in fear and shame as she fought back, clawing at his face and kneeing him in the groin as Talos had instructed her. As the man reeled, he pulled a blade from a harness slung beneath his arm and slashed out, opening up her throat. Ismini fell to her knees, clutching the wound as her lifeblood flowed out of her. Cold saturated her body. The soldier recovered and approached, holding the blade high in the air, ready to thrust it down.

Ismini wondered if the blood loss caused her to imagine things. A shadow descended with great speed on the man, knocking him away. She saw a pale woman hold him helpless in an iron embrace, long-nailed hands digging into his throat and drawing blood. He bucked and kicked but was no match for her strength.

Emerald eyes blazed from within black orbits set deep in the woman's ashen face. She smiled, revealing serpent fangs as her jaw distended. Scales were visible on the areas of her skin not covered by the white shroud that trailed out behind her and fluttered in the evening breeze.

The soldier's eyes teared as the woman bit into his neck and drank. He attempted to scream, his face red with rage, but failed due to the vise grip around his throat. His eyes glazed over and rolled into the back of his head as he was exsanguinated.

Then Ismini found herself in the woman's cold embrace, the emerald eyes looking down at her.

"Lamia," Ismini mouthed.

"Sister," the creature replied, her brilliant white teeth shining in the moonlight as she grinned. Her breath was sweet and smelled of anemone, the blood flower that thrived in the meadows. Despite her crushing strength, the lamia held Ismini gently and with more passion than any man had ever exhibited toward her.

The lamia extended her long tongue and licked the wound on Ismini's throat, coating it and staunching the blood loss. Ismini hovered on the brink

of consciousness as the lamia savored the taste of her blood. She felt the lamia's teeth on her neck, penetrating an artery like twin icicles. Cold lips kissed her throat. The teeth were quickly withdrawn—Ismini had little blood left to give.

"Blood is life, sister, and human life is all too brief," the woman said in an outdated dialect. She tore at her shroud, exposing her ivory breasts, the nipples colored like olives. She raised a sharp-nailed finger and sliced a small cut across the areola of her right breast. A clear liquid dribbled out. Ismini found herself aroused, despite the blood loss. She opened her mouth and latched onto the breast like an infant, her tongue pulling at the wound. The lamia gently pressed the back of Ismini's head forward, encouraging her in a soft voice. Ismini drank, the ichor cold but sweet. It filled her with an intoxicating sense of euphoria, far more exhilarating than any of the bumbled attempts at juvenile lovemaking she had with the young men of the village. The lamia arched her body in ecstasy, her spine curving like a snake's, head thrown back. Darkness descended on Ismini's vision as the lamia moaned in delight.

She woke the next night in a shallow grave. Dirt covered her eyes and filled her nostrils, but she did not panic. New instincts told her that she no longer needed to breathe to live and that it was time for her to rise. Strength flowed through her cold body as her claws easily tore through the loose earth. She rose in a flurry of dust to find the lamia waiting for her. Ismini recognized the area of her burial—it was near the graveyard on the outskirts of the village.

"New life requires a period of death first. There is always a sacrifice," the lamia said. The creature wore a fresh white shroud.

She spoke to Ismini at length about her new existence. Ismini could resume a normal life with her family, masquerade as a human if she so desired. She would be weak during the day but immensely strong at night. She was now undead and could not be destroyed by conventional means—only weapons forged of wood or bone could harm her. Water would reject her and refuse to reflect her image. She could not cross it except at the slack or flood of the tide. The light of the moon and her native soil would give her comfort and strength. As a being that had conquered death, she could now summon the recently dead to her aid. Her gaze would fascinate mortals while her touch would enflame their lust.

The lamia concluded her lecture. “And you will need to feed on blood, young one, on human blood to keep strong. Though you cannot starve to death, you will wither and age without it, becoming little more than a sentient piece of carrion, tormented and undying.”

Since that night, Ismini had subsisted on goat and cow blood, afraid to feed on any locals for fear of discovery. The grainy animal fluids kept her alive but weak. She knew she would require more strength for what she would attempt tonight.

She eyed the guard through the wooden slats. He, like everyone else in the arena, was distracted by battle, his thick jowls shaking in laughter as the men died. Ismini turned to her mother and saw that Alcippe also was distracted by Talos’s peril.

She seized the moment and slipped through the aperture between the slats, her body now able to fit through the smallest of openings. Ismini struck the big man to the ground like he was a child. She tore the protective leather gorget from his throat with sharp fingers then buried her fangs into his neck. She drank greedily, feeling the hot liquid pour down her throat and force the aching cold from her body. The man’s blood was so much more potent than the animal blood she had subsisted on—she wondered how she could ever settle for less.

Sublime, she thought.

Her teeth secreted venom that slowly took effect, numbing the soldier’s nerves. He moaned in pleasure, overcome by the ardor of her kiss. Ismini felt his throbbing erection through the loincloth. By the time his blood ran out, he had long ceased struggling.

“Ismini!”

She looked up from her feast, blood dripping from her lips, to see her mother staring at her through the cage slats with a look of horror on her face. She attempted to resume her human visage, but her bloodlust was up, and she could no longer hide her true face. Other people in the pen looked on in shock as well.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” Ismini said. “I did not ask for this curse. Please forgive me. I must see to Talos.”

Mentioning her brother’s name prompted her to purpose. She turned and moved with quicksilver speed across the sand to where Talos battled the Minotaur.

Her brother had proved himself to be a man of grit. Though bloody and bruised, Talos had defied the odds and was still on his feet. Roaring in fury, he swung his sword across the bullman's chest, but the blade could not penetrate the beast's thick flesh. He delivered a front kick to one of its knees, hoping to break the joint and cripple the monster, but it was like kicking iron. The creature ignored the blow, seized Talos's sword, and yanked it from his grip. It squeezed its fist and crumpled the metal without effort. The Minotaur raised its club above its head with both hands, poised to strike the final blow.

Ismini saw Talos look up, his face a mixture of resignation and exhaustion. He appeared prepared to accept his fate.

Ismini was not.

She reached her brother before the club struck, tossing him out of the way, then twisted to avoid the blow. The ground shook from the impact.

The Minotaur bellowed in anger and dismay at the newcomer who had robbed it of another victim. Ismini did not cower. Instead, she stepped forward and punched the bullman in the jaw. The blow echoed in the arena like a thunderclap. The crowd rose to its feet in awe as the Minotaur stumbled back, amazed that a small woman could stagger a creature of legend.

Ismini turned to Talos as he rose slowly from where she had thrown him, a look of amazement on his face.

"Protect our mother, my brother," she said.

Talos stood with resolve, seemingly unaffected by the fanged visage his sister now wore, and nodded his head. He headed toward the cage that housed Alcippe and the others.

The bullman used Ismini's distraction to its advantage. Its long arms gave it a reach advantage over the much shorter woman. The Minotaur delivered a tremendous backhand blow to Ismini's head, sending her reeling into the bloody sand where the bodies of the men it had killed lay.

Ismini quickly recovered, rising from the ground. The bullman was taken aback—its opponents seldom rose after being knocked down.

She looked at her hands, which were now covered in bloody sand, and felt an eldritch connection to the dead men.

The newly dead are yours to call to your benefit, the lamia had said. Ismini seized upon that connection, using the blood as a medium to force

her will into the corpses. Like broken puppets, the dead men staggered to their feet, a strange light in their eyes, possessed by an unnatural will not their own. Brain matter and innards trailed in their wake as they shambled forward on unsteady limbs.

The zombies surrounded the bullman, who snorted in shock, having never confronted the resurrected dead before. It flinched as they approached, its nose assaulted by the fetid odor of fresh decay spurred on by the unusual heat of the air.

The dead men launched themselves at the beast, wrapping themselves about its limbs and neck, holding on with untiring strength. The Minotaur bellowed in pain and rage as their teeth attacked its hide. One zombie drew blood from the bullman's throat, the eldritch energy fueling its existence making its attacks more lethal than sharpened iron.

The Minotaur regrouped and fought back with all the unbridled strength at its command. It seized the zombies one at a time and raised them overhead before smashing them to the ground. It piled them on top of one another, creating a heap of writhing carrion, their mouths open in silent screams, before trampling the broken remains into bloody mush with its huge hooves.

Ismini felt her connection to the zombies severed. The Minotaur turned to face her, its mouth set in a snarl. It lowered its head and charged, kicking up clouds of dirt in the air. Ismini moved out of the way at the last second as the beast rocketed by, barely avoiding the sharp horns, knowing that should they penetrate her cold heart, she would suffer the true death.

She lashed out with her claws, tearing a hole in the side of the Minotaur's throat. The bullman reeled as blood flew like a geyser into the air. It began to panic—no one had ever hurt it before. The creature's iron hide, normally impervious to mortal weapons, had somehow been slashed open by the claws of this strange, pale woman.

The Minotaur was frenzied, striking Ismini across the sternum with the club. Pain flared through her as the wooden weapon crushed the bones of her chest, lifting her high off the ground. She fell hard on her back some thirty meters away.

She felt the ground shake as the beast slowly staggered toward her. The bones in her chest began to reform as the bullman stood over her. Its blood

dripped slowly from the neck wound and pooled in her mouth, where her tongue greedily lapped it up.

The creature collapsed to one knee, straddling her chest. It began to strike her in the face, heavy blows which would have instantly destroyed a mortal. But the bullman's fists, for all their might, were not weapons of wood or exposed bone. Ismini felt the impact but was not incapacitated. She drew upon her innate shapeshifting abilities, as she had witnessed the lamia that turned her do. Her skin scaled and became thicker, assuming a deeper green hue, akin to a snake's hide. The Minotaur's blows bounced off her body with little effect.

Ismini felt the power of the beast's unnatural blood flood through her. Combined with the light of the full moon and the strength she drew from contact with her native soil, the young lamia had never felt so potent. Her wounds were completely healed.

She twisted away from the next blow, which plowed into the earth, creating a huge hole, and then used the Minotaur's thick arm as a lever to vault herself around onto its back. She reared her head like a serpent and struck, biting deep into the open wound on the bullman's neck.

The bestial titan screamed in agony as she drank its lifeblood, rearing and trying to throw her off. Ismini dug her claws deep into the sides of its ribcage. She removed her mouth from the wound, her eyes glowing with power, then reached forward and seized a horn in each claw. Using all her unnatural might, she pulled back and ripped the horns messily from the Minotaur's forehead. The night exploded with a sound of rending flesh. The creature screamed in unimaginable pain. Finally spent, it collapsed to the ground, lying prone, its huge chest heaving in exhaustion.

Ismini walked over to the beaten bullman and placed her small foot on its chest. It looked up at her in defeat, eyes glassy, its thick tongue lolling out the side of its mouth. She looked at Glaucus, who stood in outrage and disbelief. She raised the horns high over her head in a victorious gesture. Her people chanted her name from behind the cage. Ismini saw that Talos had broken the lock and was setting them free.

She dropped one horn and pointed that hand toward Glaucus. She turned her thumb down and then slammed the horn in her other hand through the Minotaur's chest, splintering bone and impaling its heart. The bullman shuddered and was still, its pupils constricting in death.

Glaucus screamed at his soldiers.

“I want her head!”

They swarmed the sand and attacked, thrusting at her with their spears and blades. To Ismini their movements seemed pathetically slow in comparison to the Minotaur—she avoided the blows with ease. She became a hurricane of violence as she waded into the soldiers, her claws tearing throats and severing spines in an orgy of blood. She smashed their heads with her small fists, breaking thick bones like so many eggshells, their bronze helmets offering scant protection against her strength. At one point, she seized a soldier by the arm and swung him in a circle, knocking several others off their feet. She tore the arm from the soldier’s torso and used it to beat the downed men to death. Ismini ignored the wounds she incurred from their metal weapons, which could not inflict lasting injury on her.

More soldiers came in successive waves. Despite her power, she feared she might be overwhelmed and captured again. But then the battle was joined by Talos and the other freed villagers, who picked up discarded weapons and engaged the Crete soldiers. She saw her brother thrust his blade up under the mouth of one soldier and out the top of his head. Elsewhere a group of freed Kythirans held down another soldier and speared him through the neck.

Ismini carved a path for herself through to the stands, a trail of eviscerated and dismembered corpses in her wake. The majority of the crowd was screaming and panicking, attempting to flee. Dozens were trampled in the mad crush of bodies. She saw Glaucus and his queen being shepherded through the chaos by his soldiers. The toady speaker lay broken on the floor, his purple robe now besmirched with crimson, trampled to death.

Ismini defied gravity and flew into the stands. The soldiers guarding the royal couple looked up in awe and terror as she descended like a bird of prey onto them. She dispatched them quickly, breaking their necks like twigs. Sidonia attempted to scream, only to have her cry cut short by a slash of Ismini’s claws. Her face contorted into a death masque as her head toppled off the bloody stump of her neck.

Ismini looked down with contempt upon the king, who cowered before her, raising a shaking hand in supplication.

“Please,” he begged in a quavering voice, “I can give you whatever you want. Money, power, and titles…whatever you desire! You cannot kill a king!”

Ismini noted indifferently that one of the dead soldiers had managed to drive an iron blade into her sternum. She casually removed it from the bloodless wound as she addressed the groveling Crete.

“You have nothing to offer me, little king, nothing at all. You are a sad little man who fancies himself a ruler of men, when in fact, you are not a real man at all. You are a pretender and an oppressor, an inhuman, effete slug so bored with your prosaic life that you amuse yourself by debasing and murdering others. My brother is a real man. He instills confidence in others, as did my father. Your men killed him as he slept, a harmless man in his dotage. You should know his name before you descend to Hades—Critias. Say his name, little king. I want to hear you say his name.” She leveled the blade in front of his mouth.

“Cr…Critias,” said Glaucus, spittle trailing at the corners of his mouth.

“Yell it!” Ismini demanded, her eyes seething with anger and power.

“Critias, damn your eyes!” he yelled, saliva flying.

“Enough.” Tired of wasting her time on so insignificant an insect, she thrust the blade through his open mouth, scattering his brains on the ground. The gold crown slipped off his head as his torso collapsed.

Ismini picked up the crown and turned toward the arena. Talos and the people of Kythira stood triumphant, the remaining Crete soldiers having surrendered after significant losses.

She saw her brother comforting their mother and made her way toward them.

They looked in awe at her—she was both monster and goddess at once. She handed the crown to Talos.

“The people will need a leader, one who leads by example and not fear,” she said, smiling.

“Sister…” Talos said, unsure of how to express his desire for her to stay. His gentle eyes, however, expressed his acceptance of the existence into which she had evolved.

“I must go,” she said, as if reading his thoughts. “I’ve hidden from the world and myself for far too long.” She looked over at the corpse of the

bullman. “Our people will not want a monster in their midst. Nor do they deserve one.”

“Where will you go?” Talos asked.

“There are stories of other monsters that plague mankind—gorgons, Cyclopes, beasts with three heads. Perhaps I will introduce myself. Wherever I go, you will always be in my thoughts. You will always be my family.”

She rose into the night sky, embracing the moonlight.

INVADER

Bridgett Nelson

Prologue

Gentle waves washed over her bare feet as she made her way down the tiny sliver of beach she'd so recently discovered. Unable to sleep, she had snuck out of her parents' house before dawn and spent the entire morning hiking around her lovely home, Orcas Island. Although geography wasn't her strongest subject, she did know Orcas was the largest of the San Juan archipelago and was centrally located between Seattle and Vancouver in the Salish Sea. Being so close to Seattle made her feel as though she had the best of both worlds—dazzling beaches and plentiful nature, yet relatively convenient access to all the "Emerald City" had to offer. She

loved visiting Pike's Place Market and watching those crazy dudes throw fish at each other, and she had once gone to the top of the Space Needle. Life in the Pacific Northwest was pretty terrific, especially now that she had unexpectedly come across this totally dope beach.

As far as she knew, the beach was completely unknown. She had lived on this island all her seventeen years yet had never heard a single peep about the place. It was stunning with sand as white as snow, pristine seashells scattered about, and water as clear and blue as any she had ever seen. It even smelled intoxicating—a heady blend of hardy evergreen, tangy sea salt, and the delicate scent of jasmine, the blooming shrubs growing unchecked where the sand met the forest's edge. Towering blue-green fir trees arced around the beach on three sides, offering a wall of privacy in the shape of a smile.

Gracelessly plopping down onto the soft, silky warmth of the sand, she absentmindedly twisted the Puka shell necklace she never took off, a long-time habit for which she was teased mercilessly by her school friends and little brother, Damon. *This is it*, she thought to herself. *It's just what I need to deal with the pressures of senior year*. It would be her very own secret haven—a special place where she could think, write, or simply enjoy the peace and quiet without dealing with the crazy antics of her friends and huge family. Satisfied with her decision to keep this epic discovery to herself, she contentedly sprawled across the bed of sand, hands behind her head, and allowed herself to ponder the possibilities of Ben Pike asking her to the prom next spring.

Just as she began to doze off, a loud, keening wail, followed by a large splash, caused her relaxed body to tense and sit rigidly upright. She quickly scanned the inlet looking for the source of the noise. At first, she could see only the dorsal fin of a shark zigzagging through the waves. Assuming it was feeding on a seal, which would easily explain the noises she'd heard, she quickly looked away. Although she understood and accepted the food chain hierarchy, seeing gentle creatures fall prey to hungry sharks still bothered her.

Gathering her things together, while sarcastically humming the "Circle of Life" theme from *The Lion King* movie, she prepared for the long walk back to her house. Enjoying a full-body stretch, she glanced a final time at the shark circling the inlet…and froze. Unable to believe what her eyes

were seeing, she rubbed them hard with her fists, like a small child just waking up, and stared once again at the bizarre scene playing out a hundred feet away. When her brain's neurons finally made the appropriate connections and registered the horrifying spectacle, she let out a short, high-pitched scream. Hot, acrid-smelling urine ran down her inner thighs, and she hurriedly and unthinkingly backward crab-walked as far away from the water's edge as she could get.

Before her, the grayish-brown hide of an enormous basking shark, probably twenty feet long, was thrashing through the water in a battle for its very life. Tossing the ancient leviathan around was a nightmarish creature—the thought of which would most assuredly terrify her for the rest of her days. The monster effortlessly wrapped its muscular girth around the shark's body, like a snake suffocating its prey, and quickly pulled it under the swells. Several minutes later, the crystal blue water was stained burgundy and pieces of gray flesh and yellow fat floated aimlessly in the waves. The shark was gone, yet all she could see in her mind's eye was a horrifying vision of the eel-like killer's razor-sharp teeth.

Nine Months Later

MUSIC BLARED FROM THE FANCY SURROUND-SOUND SPEAKERS THAT WERE strategically anchored to the walls throughout the vast basement.

Not that this looks much like a basement, Olivia Cochrane thought to herself as she fought her way through the drinking, gyrating, and sweating bodies of her classmates.

She was late arriving to Ben Pike's "That's A Wrap" party, where her classmates were celebrating the end of their senior year of high school. The formal graduation ceremony was scheduled the following weekend, but this was likely the last time they'd all be in a casual setting together.

Although she'd been inside this house many times before, it never failed to make an impression. Sitting atop Buck Mountain, on a cliff overlooking the sparkling indigo waters of the Salish Sea, the home was a marvel of modern architecture. It boasted four levels, including the basement, all with reflective floor-to-ceiling windows throughout. The basement alone was

larger than Olivia's entire house and offered an indoor pool and hot tub, a theater room, a game room, and a huge living area, complete with dance floor and karaoke stage, with a fully stocked bar and kitchenette. Rumor had it Ben had claimed the basement as his own private living quarters. Olivia didn't know if that was fact or fiction, and she honestly didn't care enough to find out.

Standing on her tippy toes, she searched for her boyfriend, Major Gale. Not seeing him, she instead scanned the crowd for the other three friends who completed their small, exclusive circle. Dita, who had offered to swing by and pick up Winston and Denise, said they'd be here around nine o'clock. Major had planned to catch a ride with some of the guys from the baseball team. Since it was now well after eleven, Olivia knew they had to be around here somewhere. Her attendance, however, would be a surprise. None of them were expecting to see her tonight, but she was excited to have the opportunity to spend some quality time with Major. Between final exams and ironing out college plans, they hadn't hung out much the past couple weeks.

Just thinking of his green eyes, golden skin, auburn hair, and impish grin made Olivia blush. Although they'd been together the past two years, she knew everyone secretly called them "the odd couple," and she honestly couldn't blame them. On the surface, they really did seem mismatched. Major was a jock, captain of both the football and baseball teams, and a state champion wrestler. He was loud, gregarious, and full of charisma. The University of Washington had offered him a full-ride football scholarship, and he was leaving in a little over a month to begin the mandatory practices. His life goal was to make it into the National Football League. Olivia had no doubt he'd get there. He was a hard worker, forever focused on improving his skill set.

Although Olivia was blessed with lusciously thick, straight blond hair, which hung down her back like a shiny, golden blanket, she usually wore it in a messy bun to keep it out of her face. She was nothing if not practical. Her light blue eyes and porcelain skin gave her a delicate, pixie-like look, as did her stature. She was quite petite at only five feet tall. Standing next to Major's six-foot, four-inch frame, she felt very child-like. Despite being incredibly shy, Olivia was quick to laugh and loved spending time with her friends and family. Although she wasn't athletic like her boyfriend, she was

intelligent, kind, and witty. She hoped to one day write best-selling fiction. In preparation of that goal, she had applied, and been accepted into, Brown University's creative writing program…which unfortunately meant she and Major would be living on opposite coasts come fall.

"Olivia! I've been looking for you. How's my fellow wordsmith?"

Startled out of her reverie, Olivia's anxiety ratcheted down a notch upon seeing Emmeline Pethtel, her friend and fellow co-editor of the high school newspaper. Emmeline was holding a red solo cup full of lime-green fluid… no doubt one of Ben's novel concoctions which would include the word Seahawks in the name.

"Emmeline, hi! Can you believe we're done?" asked Olivia, giving the quiet girl a quick hug.

Emmeline countered, "Right? No more of Turner's chemistry quizzes or urgent newspaper deadlines."

"It's so hard to believe high school is over. But hey, have you decided which of those prestigious colleges you're gracing with your presence come August?" questioned Olivia. Emmeline had been accepted to Stanford, Princeton, and MIT and was, understandably, having a difficult time making a firm decision.

"I'm leaning toward Princeton, but Mom is pushing for Stanford since it's a West Coast school, and Dad, the engineer, is gung-ho for MIT. My siblings don't care; they just want me out of the house so they can have my bedroom." She rolled her eyes. "At this point, I'm about ready to put all the names in a hat and draw one out—let fate decide." Emmeline sighed then looked at Olivia with a mischievous grin. "How about you? You ready to leave Major desolate and lonely when you move across the country?"

Olivia frowned. She was trying not to think of their eventual separation. Ignoring Emmeline's question, she asked, "Speaking of Major, do you know where he is? I've been trying to find him, but from my low vantage point, it's nearly impossible." She motioned toward her elfin frame.

Emmeline chuckled, rapidly scanned the crowd, and answered, "I haven't seen him, but I did see Denise and Winston hanging out in the hot tub earlier. I bet they're still there."

"Thanks, Em. I'm going to head over that way but not before I stop for a drink. How is that…stuff?" She pointed to Emmeline's neon beverage.

“Surprisingly good—Ben outdid himself this time.” Emmeline laughed. “I’ll catch up with you a little later.” Olivia wiggled her fingers in a good-bye wave and walked quickly to the bar, which was set against the back wall of the television room. A disco ball light spun in slow circles, reflecting a cascade of vivid colors onto the plush surroundings.

“Hey there, Ben…I’ll have the lime green concoction, please.”

Ben grinned and grabbed a clean cup. “You’ve got it…coming right up! You’re going to love this one, Olivia. It’s my best yet.” As he handed her the overflowing cup, he made a ridiculous kissy face and asked, “How’re things going with Major?”

“We’re good…just busy,” she replied and took a sip of her drink. “Hey, this really is good! Thanks, Ben. If you see Major, can you tell him I’m here and to please find me?”

Pulling some ice trays from a mini-fridge below the bar, he nodded. “You know it, beautiful!”

“Thanks, B!” Olivia slowly edged her way through the crowd and entered the pool room, where she found Winston splashing Denise in the face with warm, likely urine-filled, hot tub water, thanks to Ben’s half-siblings—six-year-old identical twin boys.

“Stop it, you jerk!” Denise Reed wiped the dripping liquid out of her striking blue eyes. Her dark blond hair was wet and attractively slicked back from her heart-shaped face.

“Ah, you know you love me, dumpling,” Winston jokingly cooed as he pulled her in for a hug. Winston Jewell, Denise’s long-time boyfriend, was tall, lean, always hungry, a total outdoorsman, and beyond clownish.

“Just because I love you does NOT mean I like you,” Denise mumbled as she grudgingly accepted his hug. When she caught sight of Olivia, her eyes widened, and she pointedly pushed Winston away.

“Olivia! What are you doing here? I thought you weren’t coming tonight!” she exclaimed as her eyes looked frantically back and forth between Winston and Olivia. Understanding dawned on Winston’s features, and after mumbling a quick hello, he immediately excused himself to go to the bathroom, jumped out of the hot tub, and ran dripping through the door Olivia had just entered.

Ignoring Winston’s zany antics as normal behavior, Olivia answered Denise’s question. “My grandparents are in town. They can’t make it to my

graduation next week due to an Alaskan cruise vacation they've had scheduled for nearly a year, so they came to visit this weekend instead. I had dinner with them, but at this time of night they're in bed. I figured there was no sense sitting at home when I could be here spending time with you guys. Our days together are coming to an end, after all." She offered a small, sad smile.

Denise returned the smile with one of her own and responded, "I'm so glad you came." Then she cast a subtle look at the door Winston had disappeared through. Olivia had known Denise since they started kindergarten together. Along with Dita Daub, they'd been best friends for over a decade. Olivia knew that toothy grin…and she knew it wasn't remotely sincere.

"Is something wrong, Denise?" she asked, cutting to the chase.

Like a deer caught in headlights, Denise squirmed uncomfortably. As she looked into Olivia's worried face, Denise's eyes softened and her shoulders relaxed. Nodding, as though to herself, she opened her mouth to speak, and…the door crashed open with a bang. Winston walked dejectedly through, shrugged his shoulders, and shook his head at Denise.

Looking flustered, Denise finally responded to Olivia's question. "Oh, you know…just the usual shit show."

Confused, Olivia quietly murmured, "You're both acting really weird. Will you please tell me what's going on? Where's Major?" Her voice was now so low, she was practically whispering.

Winston cleared his throat and stared at the floor. "The last time I saw him, he was with Dita on the dance floor." Denise shot him a dirty look, and Winston wilted under her glare. "But I'm probably mistaken," he blurted. "I've drunk way too much of Ben's Sex with a Seahawk."

Shaking her head, not only at the ridiculous drink name, but also because of the piercing disappointment she felt in these two people, she turned and left. As she passed the theater room, nervously gulping her drink, she paused upon hearing Dita's distinctive giggle and the low rumble of Major's voice. Were they watching a movie? Now? Reluctant to enter, she stood outside the door, trying to hear their conversation. Unfortunately, there was only silence.

Mustering her courage, Olivia gently turned the doorknob and walked into a moderately sized space filled with three rows of plush leather

recliners. The room was dimly lit with only two wall sconces offering any kind of warmth in the pitch blackness. The giant screen at the front of the room was dark. Not that it mattered. Major and Dita were definitely not watching a film.

The two most important people in Olivia's life were sitting in the center of the back row. Dita's white, silk panties were flung over the back of a recliner…the very same recliner where she was straddling Olivia's boyfriend. Her black mini-skirt was hiked up over her hips, while a flattering lemon-yellow tank top was pulled down over her breasts…breasts that were currently enveloped by Major's hands. His head was flung back against the recliner, the look on his face one of pure ecstasy.

Unable to bear watching another cringe-worthy second, Olivia's drink fell to the floor as her hand found the light switch and flicked it on. While her eyes adjusted to the bright overhead light, she heard Dita scream and Major curse as they quickly parted and attempted to get dressed. Fastening buttons and smoothing their hair, they both timidly shuffled toward her.

"I can't…," Olivia shook her head, trying to make sense of what she had seen. Shock was preventing clear thought. She finally looked up. The two of them stood several feet from her, their heads bowed, completely miserable. Feelings of intense anger began to take root.

"What the fuck, Major? And Dita, my so-called best friend…please help me understand how you both could be so goddamned cruel," Olivia snapped.

"It was a stupid mistake, babe. I was drunk. You have to believe me," Major pleaded, staring intently at her pale face.

Unwilling to get lost in the depths of those emerald green eyes, Olivia focused on the wall behind his shoulder. "So, you're telling me this is the first time you've been together?"

Dita jumped in. "No. It's not the first time, Olivia." She glanced at Olivia's boyfriend, her gaze menacing. "Quit lying to her, Major. She deserves the truth." Major's shoulders slumped in defeat.

Dita continued, "Major and I have been seeing each other for weeks now. The attraction between us was there for years, and we were both tired of waiting. I mean, let's be real here, Olivia. You're leaving Washington anyway. We were planning to make it official after you were on the East Coast." She chuckled. "Did you really think that long-distance crap was

going to work?" Dita looked defiantly beautiful glaring at Olivia, with her shoulder-length espresso-brown hair, chocolate eyes, and the gorgeous olive complexion Olivia had always secretly coveted.

Olivia's gaze shifted to Major, who suddenly seemed to find his shoes very interesting. Looking at him, so chastised and pathetic, she realized that whatever they had shared for the past two years was irrevocably broken. She was completely overcome, yet she refused to let herself cry in front of these two assholes.

Before she could find a response to Dita's heartbreaking revelation, Winston and Denise, still in their bathing suits, ran breathlessly into the room. A crowd had gathered outside in anticipation of what was to come. Comprehension dawned, and Olivia struggled with the reality she'd so recently confronted.

"You've all known the entire time, haven't you? And not a single one of you had the decency to tell me? None of you thought I deserved to know I was being deceived by the two people in my life I was closest to? Has this all been a big joke? Poor gullible, naïve Olivia…why in the world did she think she could keep a guy like Major?" The silence was deafening, so Olivia continued. "Yeah, I thought so."

She looked at Winston. "I thought you were a nice guy…the kind of guy who would never willingly hurt a girl. You've been like a brother to me all these years. How could I have been so wrong about you?"

Her gaze shifted to Denise. "And you…what a bitch. I guess your loyalties lie with Dita now, despite the fact I'm the one who has always been there for you? I mean, we all know Dita can't be bothered to worry about anyone else, especially when she's so busy shopping for clothes and makeup." Her two former friends had the decency to look ashamed, but recognizing Olivia's words about Dita as accurate, a few chuckles echoed throughout the crowd.

The laughter caught Olivia's attention. She turned her gaze to the rest of her classmates. "I've never been anything but kind to all of you, and this is how I'm repaid?" A plaintive tone had entered her voice. The tension in the room was thick with anger and bitter feelings.

"You know what? FUCK YOU ALL." Olivia's eyes found Major and then rotated slowly toward Dita. "And fuck the two of you most of all," she whispered. "You deserve each other."

Olivia pushed her way through the nosy, gossiping crowd, catching sight of Emmeline, who had tears running down her face. Emmeline rushed forward and started to say something, but Olivia wasn't in the mood to listen. She opened the door and walked into the dark, starless night, her head held high.

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, BEFORE THE SUN HAD MADE AN APPEARANCE, Olivia received a text from an unknown number. Curled inside her soft pink duvet, unable to sleep, she picked up her phone and read the eight words with great interest: *I know just what to do. Trust me.*

Four Weeks Later

"I THINK THIS IS IT," SAID MAJOR AS HE PULLED HIS RED JEEP WRANGLER off the narrow, dirt road and onto a grassy shoulder at the edge of the forest. He studied his GPS. "Looks like we're going to have to hoof it the rest of the way. I wonder where everybody else parked." His gaze flicked to the secluded, barely there dirt road, and he felt nothing but bewilderment.

"Oh, who cares? This is going to be epic!" screeched Dita. She rubbed her hand up and down Major's thigh and grinned lasciviously. "A going

away party for you on a beach none of us know anything about? It's perfect! The guys must have been planning this for weeks."

"It was definitely the football team, then?" Winston asked from the backseat.

Major replied, sporting a self-satisfied grin. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure. The anonymous text said it was a surprise, so not to ask around…but it definitely insinuated it was Coaches Sargent and Pajak who did most of the planning. The guys wanted to celebrate with the future starting quarterback of the UDub Huskies, baby!" He laughed and fist bumped Winston. "We're just supposed to show up, eat, drink, and be fuckin' merry."

"Sounds good to me," said Denise as she jumped out of the back of the Wrangler. "Dita, let's grab our bags and the coolers. We'll let the guys deal with the kayaks." They also had tents to set up, since they planned to spend the night at this little no-name beach. Major was scheduled to head to Seattle on Monday, only two days from now…and Dita planned to make the most of their remaining time together.

"I just hope Olivia wasn't invited. Awkward!" Dita wrinkled her nose as the four friends carried and dragged their supplies into the forest.

"Right?" Denise laughed. "Who does she think she is, skipping the graduation ceremony? She's so dramatic."

As they scrambled through the cool, shadowed confines of the forest, all their thoughts focused on Olivia. No one had seen or talked to her since Ben's party a month ago. And while they were all feeling various degrees of guilt for their actions, they were mostly relieved to be rid of the goody two-shoes. Was it possible for a person to be too good?

"Holy shit, check this place out!" Winston dropped the two kayaks he was dragging and ran through the rest of the fir trees onto the immaculate little beach. With happy abandon, he lifted his arms out to the side and turned in circles, his head tilted toward the sun. Then he abruptly ran back to the others, picked up Denise, and ran with her in his arms into the shimmering, azure water of the sound.

Hearing the shouts and squeals coming from the water's edge, Dita looked at Major. "It really is pretty here, isn't it?"

Major nodded. "Definitely, but where is everyone? The text said to be here at noon. Do you think we're at the right spot?"

“They’re probably having a hard time finding this place. It’s not exactly an obvious location, but it’s definitely the correct one. Plus, you know everyone likes to be fashionably late.” Dita playfully poked him in the stomach. “We don’t need to wait. Let’s set up camp. We get first dibs on everything!”

Picking a jasmine bloom from a nearby shrub, Major gently placed it in Dita’s hair and gave her a quick kiss on the lips. “You’re right. Let’s get this party started!”

AN HOUR LATER, AFTER PITCHING THEIR TENTS, BUILDING A FIRE, AND repeatedly breaking into their cooler for beer, the four friends were feeling totally relaxed. They sprawled on blankets they haphazardly placed around the fire and continued waiting for the rest of their classmates to make an appearance. It was a beautiful Saturday, the sun high in a periwinkle blue sky, unmarred by a single cloud. The sweet songs of multiple birds helped create the perfect ambience, especially when combined with the calming sound of lapping waves.

“Come on, Dita. I’m bored. Let’s go look for shells.” Denise pulled her friend to a standing position, and with quick kisses for their respective boyfriends, they strolled off down the beach.

“Want to take a quick swim and cool off, Win?” Major stood and motioned to the water. Winston, forever eager to please, eagerly jumped up and jogged toward the surf.

“You know it, dude. Race you to the sandbar!”

And with that, they both plunged into the cool, clean water, their young, lean muscles flexing and contracting as they crawl-stroked toward the raised area of sand a hundred yards from the shore.

“So, when do your classes start?” Denise asked Dita as they searched the white sand for pretty shells to add to their collections. Dita was attending Evergreen Beauty College, one of the top cosmetology schools in the United States.

Pensive, Dita replied, “Not until September, but I’ve actually been thinking about leaving for Seattle when Major does…maybe staying with him in his dorm room. Do you think he’d go for that?” Despite her bravado when facing Olivia at the party, Dita wasn’t as confident about Major’s feelings for her as she let on. There were times she felt as though he compared them…and that she came up far short of Saint Olivia.

“I’m sure he’d love having you there to support him, but he’s probably going to be really busy. I hear they work those guys pretty hard the first few weeks.” Denise bent over and let out a whoop. She’d found a shark’s tooth. “Look at this, Dita. It’s huge!”

Dita inspected the razor-sharp tooth, her eyebrows raised in confusion. This wasn’t like any shark’s tooth she’d seen before. It looked more like three teeth fused horizontally together. It had a yellowish cast, was about four inches long, and was sharp enough to slice the tender pads on her

fingertips. “I don’t think this is a shark’s tooth, D. I’m not sure what it is, but it’s definitely unique. Great find!”

Denise gave an involuntary shiver as she retrieved the tooth from Dita. “When I find stuff like this, I can’t help but wonder what in the hell is down there swimming in the water with us.”

As the girls took a moment to contemplate that terrifying thought, they were interrupted by a frantic voice coming from behind them.

“DITA! DENISE! OVER HERE!”

They turned to find Major standing on the sandbar doing, what appeared to be, jumping jacks. They could see his mouth moving, but many of his words were lost on the wind.

Dita frowned and turned to Denise. “What in the world is he doing? Is he just trying to get our attention or motioning for us to come over?”

“Probably both. Should we take the kayaks? I don’t want to ruin my hair this early in the day.”

“Good call,” nodded Dita.

As they shoved their matching neon orange kayaks into the cool water, they noticed Major fall to the ground, wrap his arms around his shins, and lay his forehead on his knees.

Dita glanced worriedly at Denise. “Do you think he’s okay?”

“Of course, he’s okay. But where’s Winnie?”

Concerned, they looked at each other and, in unison, started paddling rapidly against the soft waves. They arrived at the sandbar about three minutes later and found Major in tears.

Dita reached him first. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Nervous and clearly filled with shame, Major looked at Denise and whispered, “I can’t find Winston.”

“What do you mean you can’t find him? Is he hiding?” Denise’s voice held an edge of panic.

Major shook his head, sighed, and seemed to collect his thoughts. “We were swimming over here, racing, goofing off…you know.”

Both girls nodded, knowing very well how Major and Winston behaved when they were together.

Major continued. “I took the lead. A few seconds later, I heard him yell, but when I turned around, he had disappeared under the water. He must

have cramped up. I dived down repeatedly but couldn't find him anywhere."

Denise collapsed to her knees in the sand, her face in her hands, and quietly cried. "Not Winston. Please, God, not my Winston."

Major put his arms around her shaking shoulders. "It's going to be okay. Did either of you bring your phone like I asked? We can have divers out here in minutes. Maybe Winston got stuck in a current and was pulled farther out into the inlet. If he was close, I would have seen him. The water was perfectly clear. I'm sure he's fine. He's a strong swimmer."

Both girls looked wistfully back at the beach, where all their belongings, including their phones, sat undisturbed on the shore. Determined to help her best friend, Denise stood up. "We didn't hear you ask about the phones, but I'll paddle back and make the call right now. You two stay here and watch for him."

Wasting no time, Denise got back into her kayak and prepared to make the quick journey back to the deserted beach.

"PLEASE LET HIM BE OKAY. PLEASE LET HIM BE OKAY. PLEASE LET HIM BE okay." Denise chanted these words repeatedly to herself as she paddled back to shore, her eyes carefully scanning the water surrounding her kayak. *Winston is just playing a trick on us. Everybody knows what a jokester he is,* she reassured herself.

Her paddle hit against something solid.

Denise excitedly leaned over and peered into the depths, hoping it was Winston attempting a big scare. What she saw instead looked like a floating tree trunk in shades of silvery-blue. She tried pushing it out of the way with her paddle, worried it would capsize her kayak. Thoroughly focused on the unruly tree, she was completely unaware when the rest of the "trunk" lifted its massive head and upper body out of the water, directly in front of the outrigger. It wasn't until her kayak tilted sharply to the left, threatening to empty her into the sea, that Denise finally looked up…

…and let out a blood-curdling scream.

WORRIED THE SCREAM SIGNIFIED THE WORST POSSIBLE NEWS ABOUT Winston, Major and Dita ran over the gently sloping hill in the center of the sandbar until Denise appeared in their line of sight on the other side…and then stopped abruptly.

"What the fuck is that?" Dita shouted.

What they saw defied reality. Rising slowly out of the water, like a cobra charmed by the music of a pungi, was a creature straight from the bowels of hell. Its mottled blue-gray body was thick and muscular, at least three feet wide. Its length was a mystery, but if the amount of its body raised out of the water was any indication, Major estimated it had to be at least fifty feet long. The most horrifying part, the thing he couldn't wrap his mind around, was the creature's head…which was nothing but a disc-shaped mouth. It was a perfect circle with no discernible lower jaw.

Concentric rows of hundreds of horn-shaped, knife-like teeth filled its oral cavity. At the center, flicking in and out in anticipation of its next meal, was a raspy, razor-sharp pink tongue. As the creature turned its head, Major could see an opaque, milky-white eye with a football-shaped black center on the lateral side of its body, just above a horizontal line of breathing holes. To Major, who had lived his entire life on this island, it looked like a mutant sea lamprey on steroids.

Finally focusing on Denise, Major realized she was in real danger and started screaming for her to paddle back to the sandbar. Dita, filled with desperation, quickly joined in.

They were too late.

DENISE KNEW SHE NEEDED TO GET OUT OF THE KAYAK AND SWIM TO SAFETY, but her muscles were frozen. She couldn't move. She felt as though she were underwater. Everything was slow and muted, including her thoughts. She could hear Dita and Major yelling, but it was just background noise. Her eyes were focused on this thing blocking her way to the beach, and her ability to get to her phone. Winston needed her, dammit, yet all she could do was sit and stare at this alien body, shiny with some sort of grotesque slime. And the teeth…God, those teeth! They made a shark's mouth look positively benign. She was further distracted by the viscous, yellow-tinted saliva, which dripped from their tips and plopped soundlessly onto the

polyethylene surface of her kayak. So fucking gross. She also noticed the teeth looked suspiciously like the one she found on the beach.

Denise wasn't ignorant. She knew exactly what was in store for her, but her horrified mind and paralyzed muscles were helpless to change the outcome. As the monster's muscular body coiled to strike, she felt her body relax in resignation. When the diabolically gruesome mouth suctioned onto her abdomen, when its multitude of teeth pierced her tanned skin…even as she felt its raspy, piston-like tongue digging into her very core, all she could see was Winston's smiling face.

MAJOR AND DITA WATCHED IN HORROR AS THE MUTANT LAMPREY BORED into, and ate its way entirely through, Denise's trunk. Her entire body folded in on itself as it demolished her spinal column. It pulled what was left of her corpse into the water, leaving her empty, orange kayak as an offering to the sea. The couple sat, stunned, on the gritty-textured sand, atop the shoal in the middle of the inlet. Their dire situation was suddenly all too clear.

Dita broke the silence. "Major, that thing just ate Denise. It ate her… that fucking monster ATE my best friend!" Her voice grew higher and more hysterical the longer she talked. She gagged, throwing up sticky green bile into the surf, and then once again started her overwrought rambling. Not knowing what else to do, and feeling completely lost, horrified, and out of control himself, Major stood, threw his head back, and screamed for as

long, and as loudly, as he could. Stunned by his reaction, Dita stopped babbling. Major eventually eased himself back down to the ground, depleted.

Neither of them spoke as the minutes ticked slowly past. Instead, they watched the sea gulls play in the waves and, much farther out, a sailboat bobbing on the surging swells. Dita, heartbroken and horror-stricken, glanced at Major and noticed how intently he was focused on the water. “Do you see that?” he asked, motioning with a nod of his head. The current was bringing something long and pale directly toward them. “What in the hell is it?”

Dita squinted as she attempted to see what Major saw. The object in the water quickly became recognizable, much to her extreme dismay. Sickened, Dita put her hand over her mouth and dry-heaved. Thankfully, there was nothing in her stomach left to puke. She knew exactly what it was—Winston’s dismembered leg. The St. Bernard tattoo on his calf—one he’d designed himself after his beloved dog, Jim Carrey, passed away last year—gave it away.

Major looked from Dita to the object in the water, horror slowly dawning across his features. “Well, I guess that answers that question.”

He turned to Dita, anguish written all over his face. “What do we do? Swimming killed Winston and kayaking killed Denise, but we can’t stay on this sandbar forever. We have to get back to the beach one way or another. Do we wait for the others to arrive?”

“Baby, I don’t think anybody else is coming,” Dita murmured with resignation, gently rubbing his shoulder. Wires had somehow become crossed, but they were, most assuredly, on their own. “Why don’t we just rest right now and let everything sink in? An idea might come to us when we’re not feeling quite as emotional.”

Major nodded, thinking it was as good of a plan as any. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed. Within minutes of lying down in the warm sand, their bodies relaxed and sleep came.

MAJOR DREAMED.

In his dream, he and Dita were standing on a cliff. As it started to give way, Dita fell, but Major managed to grab her hand and hold tight. The longer he held on, the more the cliff fell away, and the louder Dita screamed as rocks pummeled her head on their way down. His hand was sweating, and she was starting to slip. At that moment, the piece of rock holding him crumbled away, and they both slid over the precipice into the black, silent void.

He awoke, screaming, only to hear Dita's real-life screams mingled with his own. Her hand was still gripped inside his, but she was wrenching hard against him. He turned his head and gaped. The lamprey's upper body was laid out flat on the beach, its lower half still submerged. Dita's arm was inside that hellish mouth. Dark blood poured onto the sand as it sawed its way through her flesh and bone. They had fallen asleep near the water's edge, falsely believing they were safe on land.

"Help me, Major! PULL!" Dita was understandably panicked and screaming. Tears flooded her cheeks. "It hurts so much. Help me, please! Pull harder!"

He gripped her waist with his spare hand and pulled with all the strength he could muster. Seconds later, after very little effort on Major's part, the tension from the lamprey unexpectedly lessened. The eel-looking beast had seemingly disappeared back into the water. Dita was left lying on her back in the sand, looking a bit like da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, when they both realized the lamprey hadn't actually let go—it had gnawed her arm off at

the shoulder joint and escaped back into the deep with a tasty snack. Dita, anguished, in shock, and desperate, pulled her remaining hand from his and tried to staunch the extensive blood flow.

“Major, for Christ’s sake, do something! Please don’t let me die. I don’t want to die. I’m so scared, baby.” She sobbed. “Please, Major. Hel…”

Her words, the last Major would ever hear, were cut off as the lamprey, having whipped its upper body back onto the sand, aggressively sucked her head into its gaping maw. The enormous teeth sliced through the skin on her beautiful face, while the icepick tongue hungrily thrust itself into her skull, attempting to penetrate the soft tissues of her brain. Dita was in the throes of a massive seizure as the demon sea creature dragged her desecrated body into the deep blue sea.

MAJOR KNEW HE NEEDED TO ACT, AND QUICKLY. WHILE THE LAMPREY WAS distracted with Dita’s body, he would swim to the beach. He was strong, he was fast, and he knew he could make it safely across.

Without pausing to re-think his plan, Major dove head-first into the surf. Adrenaline fueled his body, his muscles were loose, and he was hurtling across the water. He felt good and strong—immortal, even.

Two hundred fifty feet left to traverse…

Two hundred feet…

One hundred twenty-five feet…

Something grabbed Major's ankle, aggressively pulling him underwater. He kicked with his other leg, fully connecting with something soft. The grip on his ankle relaxed, and he kicked his way back to the surface. After a few gasping breaths to oxygenate his body, Major got back in position to start his freestyle stroke…but didn't get that far. In front of him, staring with a milky, dead eye, was the lamprey. Instinctively using his hands as paddles, while keeping his eyes on his ugly fucking foe, he pushed himself back through the water, putting as much distance between himself and those vicious rows of teeth as physically possible. Once again, he didn't get far. His back hit against something slick and hard. Quickly twisting his body to figure out a way around the blockade, he found himself staring into another lifeless, reptilian eye.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me."

He quickly paddled away from the second creature, placing himself somewhere in the center, equidistant from both. As his tortured mind tried to figure out a new escape strategy, the two enormous lampreys began producing clicking sounds in the back of their throats. It reminded Major of the noises he'd heard the dinosaurs make in those Jurassic World movies.

Are they communicating? Deciding who gets which bits of me for dinner? Jesus.

The water around him suddenly began rippling. He felt as though he was sitting in a hot tub whose jets had just been turned on. Bubbles and foam broke the surface as he helplessly treaded water and waited to see the next horror-movie monster which was obviously ready to make its screen debut.

He didn't have to wait long. One by one, juvenile lampreys, dozens of them, began popping their circular heads above the water. About a foot wide and perhaps ten feet long, the offspring already had rows of deadly sharp teeth and raspy, needle-like tongues. Mom and Dad had feasted on his friends so now, he guessed, it was time to feed their brood—and he was on the menu.

As the smaller lampreys moved to attack, Major gazed wistfully at the beach—at the tents, the cozy blankets, the fire they'd built, which was, surprisingly, still burning brightly. They'd set up their camp so far from the water line, there was no way the lampreys could reach anything there.

Wait…did I just see people?

He squinted.

And were they roasting s’mores?

Were guests finally showing up for his surprise party? Couldn’t they see and hear what was happening to him? Why weren’t they calling for help? As he raised his arms and prepared to start yelling, he saw a figure with long blond hair stand and walk closer to the water’s edge while still maintaining a safe distance.

Olivia.

She stared at him with a small smirk on her face, lifted her hand, and waved. A second figure joined her. They stood shoulder to shoulder and unemotionally watched his body absorb the first of the lampreys’ bites. The woman next to Olivia absentmindedly lifted her left hand and started twisting an ugly shell necklace—Emmeline. Of course, it was Emmeline. That chick had been acting strange throughout their entire senior year.

As Major lost his fight against the lampreys and began sinking into the depths, his last clear vision was of both women victoriously giving him the middle finger. *Wow*, he thought dazedly, geysers of blood spewing from his ravaged body. *I guess Olivia wasn’t such a saint after all.*

SEVEN YEARS BAD LUCK

Brian Asman

They found him in the bathroom—razor blade in hand, slumped against the wall, shirtless in black boxer briefs. Half his face slathered with shaving cream. A cruel red line etched across his neck, blood weeping down his lightly furred chest, crimson rivulets running over the slight concavity between his nipples.

His pupils looked like dirty marbles in his skull.

Minutes before, his mother had stood outside the bathroom, heard the sound of the shower, seen the steam creeping under the door. She knocked twice, told the boy to hurry up or he'd be late for school. He'd never actually been late for school, but his mother regarded her knocking as some sort of prophylactic against that very possibility.

Then she'd gone down to the kitchen to join her husband, who was eating a banana and scrolling through his phone. Later, they both agreed they'd heard the shower turn off, a detail likely misremembered because

who would notice such a thing? Especially in a multi-story McMansion, with three-and-a-half full baths and the boy's younger sister blasting a Toasters' song from her room.

What they definitely noticed was his absence at the breakfast table. Well after his Cookie Crisp turned to mush in its bowl, their son had not come downstairs. Assuming the sort of assumptions one makes about teenage boys, but perhaps still possessed of primal instincts that breathily whispered the wrongness of the situation in their coddled ears, they walked up the lushly carpeted stairs and knocked on the door to the bathroom the boy used exclusively.

No answer came from within.

Then a barrage of fiercer knocking, shouts asking if he was okay. Still no reply came. With visions of their only son lying prone on the bathroom floor, knocked unconscious after falling out of the tub, his father turned the knob and the door swung open.

And then they saw.

First, the mirror, steam-clouded but for a hand-swipe across the middle. Next, the boy, bloodied and still against the opposite wall. For some unknown reason he'd shaved half his face before taking his own life, almost as though the act of shaving itself had convinced him of the Sisyphean pointlessness of human existence and he'd suddenly said no more.

At the far end of the hall, their only daughter, and now only child, finally registered their screams over the blaring horns she always listened to as she brushed her hair. Rolling her eyes (teenagers, right?), she set her brush down on top of the dresser and went to see what was the matter.

GRANT GULDEN KNEW THERE WAS SOMETHING WRONG THE FIRST TIME Sasha brought him back to her place.

He'd suspected something might be off anyway, since she was a real, live girl who seemed genuinely interested in him. They'd met on one of those dating apps, the kind that always felt like shopping. Does this one look appetizing? Swipe right for yes, left for no, maybe after reading a few sparse details about their interests. He found a lot of women didn't bother writing profiles, preferring to let their pictures do all the talking. Which put him in a jam, since he wanted to open with something more thoughtful than "Hey" or, even worse, "You're hot."

Grant didn't care for online dating, but then he hadn't been having much luck in the real world, either. He'd chatted with a few girls online, went on a handful of dates. Nothing special, but striking out electronically didn't carry the same weight as striking out at a bar. The worst that could happen was some girl wouldn't message him back.

After he'd matched up with Sasha, they'd gone back and forth a little bit, talking about regular hiking trails, favorite animals, where they'd grown up, her visceral hatred of ska of any wave. He asked her out to a coffee shop, but she wanted to meet at a park instead. Which worked out nicely. Grant brought a blanket and a bottle of wine, and they enjoyed a cozy afternoon reclining on a great green slope overlooking the city of San Diego, watching dogs and their tennis ball-tossing owners merrily violate the leash laws.

He thought he'd made a mistake when he went to kiss her. She turned her head away for a moment. As he opened his mouth to apologize for being too forward, she'd turned back and kissed him square on the lips.

"I'm sorry," she said, pulling away. "It's just, it's been a while. Since I've dated anyone."

"I get it."

They went on a few more dates. The beach, hiking. A couple times he suggested a wine bar, but Sasha demurred, saying she'd rather be outside.

Grant didn't much care. He was happy just to be with her.

A few dates in, still wet and salty from kayaking the cove, Sasha asked him back to her place.

She lived in a one-bedroom walk-up a few blocks from the beach. Grant followed her in, the cramped living room awash in floral scents. All the blinds were drawn, and Grant blinked for a moment until Sasha flipped on the overhead lights. The living room had a couch and a chair, no television. A few unframed posters lined the walls, the kind of prints found in the home of anyone with a casual interest in art history: Monet, Manet, Rembrandt. A large bookshelf dominated one wall, serving as both furniture and explanation for the lack of television.

"Do you want to shower first?" Grant said, hesitating on the linoleum just inside the door, horribly aware of both his presence in a woman's home for the first time and his wet board shorts under the towel wrapped around his waist.

"You can go first," Sasha said, blue eyes somehow brighter underneath her damp, blond hair. "I kind of drip-dried on the way back. Salty, though."

"Thanks," Grant said, hefting his backpack in one hand and hot-footing it across the carpet to the open door of the bathroom. Kayaking was the perfect date—physical, cooperative, and a great excuse to bring along a change of clothes.

"There's extra towels in the big drawer," Sasha called through the door.

"Thanks," Granted replied, opening the vanity and pulling out a neatly folded and deliciously fluffy purple towel from on top of the stack. As he stood up straighter, he noticed something odd about the bathroom.

There wasn't a mirror.

The medicine cabinet door had been removed from the cut-out that held all manner of cosmetics, lotions and bottles, a pair of lonely and rust-bitten

hinges marking the place where it had once been attached.

He looked around the room for another mirror. *Weird*, he thought. *Maybe she's a vampire. Ha.*

Then he showered and waited on the couch while she showered, and they got to know each other better.

DAYS TURNED INTO WEEKS. SASHA AND GRANT GREW CLOSER, GOING FOR walks on the beach, kayaking, making love at her place. It was a good routine. Grant's arms and stomach grew taut, his skin gained a healthy glow. He even started reading again, after he'd complained one night about not being able to watch the Padres game and Sasha pushed a novel called *Mongrels* into his hands.

They were getting to the point where somebody was going to have to say, "Hey, are we boyfriend and girlfriend or what?"

Two things stopped Grant from asking that question.

The first was that she never wanted to go to his place. Hers was closer to the beach. But in a month, she'd never come over. He'd asked her a few times and she'd always made up some reason why they needed to spend the night at hers. She had to be at work early, even though she'd never explained exactly what she did for a living.

The second was that she'd only met his friends in passing. Every time his friends planned a happy hour or a night out, even bowling, Sasha always had something to do the next day.

“You can go,” she’d tell him. “Have fun with your friends. You can come over after.”

But the idea of abandoning the smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose for his dumbass friends always made him text them, “Sorry, another time.”

One night, driving back from a hike up El Capitan, Sasha riding scrunched down in the passenger seat with her knees up against the side window like she always did, Grant decided to push things.

“Babe, let’s go to my place tonight.”

Sasha tensed up next to him. “I’ve got those Thai leftovers we should eat. They might not last another day.”

Thai food they’d ordered in. Grant wondered sometimes if she was agoraphobic, except that didn’t square with the hiking and kayaking.

“Come on,” Grant said, putting on his best smile. “It’ll be fun. You’ve never even seen my place.”

Sasha wrapped her arms around his and nuzzled her face into his shoulder. “You come on. Think of the pineapple-fried rice.”

“What if I make dinner?”

She gave his shoulder a bite through his flannel shirt. “What if you are dinner?”

“Is there something wrong with my place? We never hang out there. Let’s just make dinner. I’ll grill some Mahi, and then I’ll give you a ride home if you don’t want to stay.”

Sasha sighed. “I just like my place, that’s all. You’re right, though, it’s not fair we always go to mine. I guess we can go to yours tonight. It’ll be fine. Fun.”

Grant looked over. Sasha was staring at the floor mat, massaging her temples. Her lips moving, silently whispering to herself.

An affirmation. A lie.

AS SOON AS THEY WALKED IN THE DOOR TO HIS APARTMENT, SASHA SEEMED skittish, like he'd talked her into breaking into a derelict house or something. Her shoulders quaked beneath her thin woolen sweater.

"It's okay, babe. I really live here. Promise."

"Yeah, it's, uh, nice," Sasha said, her eyes scanning the room quickly without landing on anything.

Grant set his bag down by the door. "You can grab a seat on the couch while I get dinner started. You want anything to drink?" He glanced up when she didn't respond. "Sasha?"

She was staring at the couch. A typical brown felt three-seater, neither particularly nice nor particularly dirty. He wondered if she was thinking about how many other girls might have sat on it.

There weren't that many.

"Why don't I just help you cook dinner?" Sasha said.

"Uh, sure." Grant walked into the kitchen, or rather over to it, since the kitchen and living room were separated by a chest-high breakfast bar covered in mail and a wire basket full of bananas.

"Banana? You know, for the potassium?"

Sasha shook her head. "I'll wait for the Mahi. How about some wine in the meantime?"

Grant poured them each a glass of pinot noir. Sasha seemed to relax a little.

Maybe she just likes being at home, Grant thought.

They spent the next half hour cooking dinner and chatting. Sasha seemed more like herself. After he'd filled their plates with pan-fried fish, veggie stir fry and rice, Grant asked if she wanted to pick out a movie to watch while they ate.

Sasha blanched, her plate jiggling in her hands. "No, why don't we just —I know! Let's sit here at the breakfast bar. Then we can talk. And drink?"

Grant appraised her for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, okay, let me move this mail out of the way."

He scooped up a handful of letters and coupons and looked around the apartment before depositing them on the kitchen counter.

"I'll go through that later."

"Right."

Maybe Grant wasn't the greatest cook, but the meal was decent and the company even better. They talked about everything and nothing, trifles from childhood, like the Little League trophy Grant won after hitting a double in the bottom of the ninth with two men on. The Louisville Slugger he'd swung that day hung above his couch, an artifact that had survived over twenty years of lesser achievements to retain its place of pride in the living room. Grant told her about Christmases and birthdays, songs he'd liked in seventh grade, dumb things he'd gotten into with his buddies from college. His wine-addled mind was dimly aware of how little she was sharing herself, but Sasha kept prompting him, seemingly wanting to know every last minute detail about his life.

After dinner, they opened another bottle and Sasha tried to insist on cleaning their plates, but he wouldn't have it.

Not long after that, they went to bed.

GRANT WOKE UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, COVERS TANGLED AROUND his waist, Sasha on her stomach next to him. His left arm was dead asleep. Careful not to wake her, he slowly pulled his arm out from under her neck and sat up.

A few shakes later, pins and needles swarmed his arm. He'd forgotten the downsides of sleeping with someone else. The balled-up underwear on the floor next to the bed reminded him of the upsides.

A faint, murmuring noise drew his attention. Sasha was muttering something in her sleep. Some sort of sing-songy refrain. He leaned closer, his ear hovering over her lips.

"If you see you…then you'll see me…tra la la, tra la di…"

Grant shook his head. Weird. Just another one of Sasha's quirks. She seemed to have a never-ending supply of them, but then again there she was, lying on her stomach in one of his old t-shirts, moonlight from between the blinds highlighting her butt cheeks.

He pulled on his boxers and went to the bathroom, leaving the light off so he'd hopefully fall back asleep. He took a piss, trying his best to aim in the dark. It wouldn't do for Sasha to wake up and find urine all over everything.

Reasonably certain he'd kept it in the bowl, he flushed the toilet and turned on the faucet. Bending over the sink, he filled his hands with water and took a drink. As he stood up, he caught a glimpse of himself in the darkened mirror.

Something moved behind him.

Grant yelped, jumping and reaching for the light. A flick of the switch ignited the overheads. Nothing behind him. He paused for a moment, straining to hear anything over the sound of his own breathing.

Nothing in the bathroom but the soft gurgle of the toilet.

Grant laughed to himself. Nerves, spawned from a few hours of drunk-sleep and the novelty of actually having a woman sleeping in his bed again. One he liked, even.

He glanced back at the mirror. Nothing but the familiar beige wall behind him, the towel bar strung with a mauve towel he wished he'd remembered to wash. And him, looking bleary-eyed and disheveled.

Nerves, he thought.

Tap.

He jerked away from the sink, looked around the room. The pipes, maybe? These were older apartments, built in the eighties, and—

Tap.

It almost sounded like the noise was coming from the mirror. Grant leaned over the sink, listening. He grabbed some bunched-up toilet paper and laid a hand on the cabinet, skin crawling at the thought of a roach or water bug crawling all over his toiletries.

Tap.

The noise drew his attention back to the mirror. He looked past his disheveled appearance, a slight motion pulling his gaze down to the bottom of the mirror—where a single elongated fingernail, slathered in glitter and purple and yellow nail polish, tapped the mirror again.

From the inside.

Grant stumbled backwards, the towel bar jabbing into his spine, gaping at that horrible nail tapping on the wrong side of the glass. Other nails joined it, clicking their way into view from the bottom of the mirror, skittering up the surface, and then a hand, pale and veiny and perversely stretched out like in a funhouse mirror.

The nails kept tapping on the inside of the mirror until they reached the top and paused. Right on the reflection of his hairline. Veins pulsed in the wrist, thumping in time to the same rhythm the nails tapped out.

He looked up, didn't see anything above him.

Suddenly the hand descended, dragging its nails along the face of the mirror, a shrill squeak emanating from the glass like a blackboard except

far, far louder.

Grant covered his ears and screamed.

Sasha rushed into the bathroom, something black and orange in her hand. She lunged forward, plunging the object into the center of the mirror.

Shattering it.

The horrible sound from the mirror stopped. Shards cascaded down the wall and into the sink. Grant realized he was still screaming and clapped a hand over his mouth until he got himself under control.

“Hand me the wastebasket,” Sasha shouted over her shoulder.

Grant gaped at her.

“The trash can, now!” she repeated.

Moving mechanically, his limbs stiff and heavy, Grant picked up the small black trash can from between the tub and the toilet and handed it to her.

Sasha cradled the wastebasket under one arm, the side of her breast squishing into the plastic edge, picking shards out of the sink and tossing them in. “I knew it, I knew it, I knew it,” she muttered.

Grant watched her work, hands hanging at his sides. His mind was a buzzing hornet’s nest of questions, different thoughts fighting each other as they tried to make their way to his lips. Instead, he said nothing.

“Ow, shit!” Sasha brought a finger up to her mouth and sucked on it.

“Cut yourself on the glass?” Grant said, taking a step closer to the sink.

She had not. The remaining shards in the porcelain sink roiled with dozens of tiny hands, all bearing the same painted fingernails. All of them reaching out of the broken glass, slashing the air.

“What the hell?” Grant said.

“Hand me that towel.”

Grant yanked the towel so hard he ripped the rack from the wall, sending flecks of dust and drywall spiraling toward the ceiling. He passed her the towel, his racing mind somehow still catching the slight musty smell.

He really should have washed it before he had her over.

Sasha wrapped the towel around her hand and reached back into the sink, scooping up the shards and throwing them in the wastebasket. “What other mirrors do you have in the house?”

“Mirrors?” he replied dumbly.

“Yes, fucking mirrors, Grant. How many mirrors do you have?”

“Uh—” Grant ticked them off on his fingers. “I think there’s one on my dresser. In the bedroom.”

“Go get it. No others?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Okay. Bring it here and smash it in the sink. And whatever you do, don’t look in it.”

Grant raced back through the apartment and into his bedroom, nearly tripping over a pile of clothing on the floor. He righted himself and grabbed the hand mirror off his dresser by its plastic handle, angling it downwards, careful not to look in it.

As he walked into the bathroom, something stung the bare flesh of his thigh. A single finger protruded from the underside of the hand mirror, a fat droplet of his own blood sliding down the nail.

Before he could scream, Sasha grabbed the mirror out of his hands and smashed it in the sink. With the towel, she picked those pieces up and tossed them in the wastebasket.

“You don’t have a safe or anything, do you?” she asked.

Grant shook his head. “No. No safe.”

“Okay, um, we’ll put this in the dishwasher.”

“Dishwasher?”

“It locks, doesn’t it? Look, once the mirror’s smashed, she can’t come all the way out. More an annoyance than anything else.”

Grant looked down at the red slash on his thigh. He balled up some toilet paper and pressed it against the wound.

“You still don’t want these shards around,” Sasha continued. “Damn it, I really thought I was safe. I shouldn’t have come here. It’s been years since __”

Everything clicked for Grant. He’d listened to a podcast about this thing that happened in Colorado, years before. The details fit.

A group of teenagers, dead. Forensics that didn’t even come close to adding up.

And a handful of survivors, all irrationally afraid of mirrors. Eisotrophobia, he remembered the podcast host calling it.

“You were there. Holy shit.”

Just my luck, he thought. *I finally meet someone and she's goddamn cursed.*

Sasha finished tossing the mirror fragments in the trashcan, wrapping the towel tightly around it. "Here."

"Okay, dishwasher it is," he said, taking the can.

She nodded. "Are you sure you don't have any other mirrors in the house?"

Grant shook his head. "I mean, I'm a guy."

"Asshole."

Grant went into the kitchen and opened the dishwasher. The bottom drawer was full of pots with dried macaroni stuck to the bottom, plates with tacky, multi-colored stains. He set the trashcan down and emptied the bottom drawer. He tried to ignore the scrabbling noises coming from underneath the towel. Once he'd made enough room, he put the trashcan in the dishwasher and locked the door.

He poked his head into the bathroom. Sasha was leaning over the toilet, panting heavily, blond hair hanging ragged on either side of her face.

"Here," he said, pulling her hair back.

"I'm fine," she said but didn't pull away. She retched again. Only a thin sliver of drool came out. She wiped it away with the back of her hand.

"What do we do now? Go out for breakfast?" Grant asked with a weak smile.

"Not funny."

Something clunked under the sink.

Sasha's head whipped up. "What was that?"

Grant eyed the cabinet. "Water in the pipes?"

The sound came again.

"That's not water," Sasha said, pushing off the toilet rim and clambering to her knees. "I thought you said you didn't have any more mirrors."

"I don't. Except—oh, shit."

"What?"

"There's a little hand mirror in my Dopp kit."

The thumping sounds underneath the sink increased in tempo.

"Get your bat."

Grant ran to the living room and snatched his old Slugger from its mount on the wall, then back to the bathroom. Sasha waited next to the

vanity, a hand poised on the knob of the cabinet.

“Hopefully, she’s still in your Dopp kit. When I open the door, smash that fucking thing. You got it?”

Grant nodded, glad Sasha still had her wits about her. Otherwise, he’d probably have just stood there while those multi-colored fingernails sliced him to bits.

“Now!” Sasha flung the cabinet open. Something was moving inside the Dopp kit, probing the faux leather. Seeking a way out.

With the tip of the bat, Grant swept the bag from beneath the sink. It flopped onto the floor, the thing within still moving. A fingernail pierced the side and sliced the bag open. The rip widened, revealing fingers moving amongst the travel-size bottles of toothpaste and shaving cream.

He brought the bat down once, twice, three times, smashing the shit out of his bag. The fingers disappeared.

But somewhere within, tiny hands were emerging from the shards.

“Throw it in the dishwasher, too, I guess?”

“Yeah. Just be careful.”

Grant set the bat on the sink and stooped to pick up the bag. The tear looked like an angry mouth, ready to consume any flesh that strayed too near. He gingerly held the bag by a corner. Little hands caromed like roaches within.

As he rounded the corner into the living room, he saw himself reflected in the empty television screen. And then something else stepped into the frame.

The thing in the TV looked like a drunken child’s drawing of a human being. The head was queerly shaped, stretched and smooshed, chin and forehead flowing in different directions. Its arms were long and narrow, fingers pointed like blades, while its midsection was perversely rotund.

For the second time that night, Grant screamed.

Sasha lunged into the living room, brandishing his bat. “Where? Where is she?”

Grant pointed a trembling finger at the monstrous figure that stood next to his own reflection. “There.”

Sasha glanced at the TV. “Oh. There she is. Huh.” She made no move to swing the bat.

Grant looked at her, bewildered. “Aren’t you going to—”

Sasha shrugged. “She only comes out of mirrors. I don’t like looking at her, though. Why I don’t have a TV.”

“Huh.” The twisted thing in the television stared back at him, impotent and malevolent at the same time. “How is this even possible, I mean what —”

“Your Dopp kit.”

He looked down at the bag. “Oh yeah.” He locked the bag in the dishwasher with his wastebasket.

Sasha turned the TV around on its stand so it faced the wall and sat down on the couch. “I didn’t smash it,” she said. “I figure you can still sell it.”

“Sell it?”

Sasha nodded. “Well, yeah. Unless you like looking at her every time you walk in the living room.”

“Every time—”

“And you’ll have to comb your hair by feel. You’re a guy, I don’t know, maybe you can get a buzz cut or something. Yeah,” she continued, brightening, “you’d probably look pretty sexy with short hair.”

Grant ran a hand through his hair, unkempt from hours of sleep. “Wait, you mean—”

Sasha’s face fell. “Yeah. I fucked up. I shouldn’t have gotten you into this. I really thought I was free,” she said, more to herself than Grant. “I wasn’t even involved; it was my stupid brother and his friends. Thought it would be funny, giving this girl bunk X and locking her in the House of Mirrors for the night at our high school carnival. Except it wasn’t bunk, and they gave her too much. Way too much.”

“I read once,” Grant said, his voice sounding foreign in his own ears, “back in Victorian times when someone died, they covered all the mirrors in the house.”

“A bunch of cultures do it. Turns out there’s a reason for it.”

Grant opened his mouth, to say something, anything, but Sasha cut him off. “I just thought, I don’t know, it’s been years since everything happened. And I’ve been so careful. You’ve seen my place. I don’t go anywhere there might be mirrors, like bars. I started carrying around that Lifehammer in my purse, just in case. I even keep my blinds drawn, so I don’t ever see her

reflected in the window. I've never actually seen her, until tonight. But now I know she's after me. And she's seen you."

Grant sighed and sat down next to her on the couch. "I guess I'm fucked, then."

She patted his knee. "It's not so bad. At least you won't have to learn how to put on makeup by feel. I probably looked like the fucking Joker for the first few months." She exhaled heavily. "I am sorry, though. I wouldn't wish something like this on anyone. Especially someone I care about. I'm not going to lie, it's hard, living like this. But what am I supposed to do, never date anyone again? Live life like a nun or something?"

Grant looked at her, feeling tears well up. Whatever he thought about his current situation, and he hadn't even begun to consider what the implications for the rest of his life might be, seemed so much less important than the look in Sasha's eyes.

He forced a smile, hoping it would appear genuine enough. "You were worth it."

Sasha leaned in and kissed him. "God, I hope so. You know, I don't get it, though. Why she came tonight."

Something clicked in Grant's head. "You were singing. This little rhyme, in your sleep. Something about seeing you, seeing me?"

"Wait, in my sleep? God damn—"

Something crashed on the other side of the wall.

Someone screamed. And kept screaming, the noise mostly muffled by the wall, sounding strange and far away.

They jumped off the couch. Sasha and Grant stood side-by-side, baseball bat in Sasha's hands, regarding the living room wall.

"My neighbor," Grant said lamely. The screaming cut out with a jarring finality.

"We have to leave."

"And go where?"

"Anywhere. The mountains. Out to the desert. Somewhere without mirrors."

Grant looked around his apartment. Wondered if he'd ever see it again. "Let me just grab—"

A hand burst through the wall and they both screamed.

Another smashed through, candy-striped fingernails swiping viciously at the air. Hands grabbed the edges of the holes they'd made and pulled, making them bigger.

"Sasha—"

The wall ripped open. They jumped over the couch, staying away from those probing fingers.

Something inside of the wall was singing. Grant froze for a moment, one foot perched on the arm of the couch. Listening.

"If I see you, you'll see me, tra la la, tra la di."

"Grant!" Sasha yelled and ran for the door.

Grant snapped out of his reverie and followed, snatching his keys and wallet off the table. They ran outside to his car. The sky was turning pink, the first rays of dawn emerging to the east.

Behind them, his neighbor's door burst open.

They reached the car in seconds. Sasha cocked back the bat and shattered the mirror on the passenger's side. The car alarm went off, the horn honking and lights flashing. She ran around the front of the car and took out the driver's side mirror.

"Get the rearview mirror, Grant!"

Grant hit the unlock button on the fob, and the alarm stopped. He threw open the door and leaned in. A hand emerged from the rearview mirror. He grabbed the sides of the mirror and with a strength born of pure hysteria ripped it from the windshield, spinning around and spiking it on the ground like a football.

Sasha was already sliding into the passenger seat. "Let's go, hurry."

Grant jumped into the car, jabbed his key at the ignition for an interminable moment until the key finally slid home, and started the engine.

"Come on," Sasha yelled, slapping the dash.

Grant pulled out as fast as he could, nearly clipping the bumper of the car parked in front of him, then floored it. At the end of the block, he had to slow down to turn. Sasha whipped her head around, looking out the back window.

"Is she back there?"

Sasha shook her head. "No. Nothing."

Grant exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "Good."

Silently, they drove into the coming dawn.

THEY DRESSED THEMSELVES IN MISMATCHED, MILDEWED CLOTHES FROM A gym bag Grant found in the backseat. When they stopped for gas and food, he parked at the pump farthest away from the other cars, to avoid the danger of their mirrors. Sasha ran in to get food and drinks. He hadn't wanted her to expose herself to the fisheye mirrors they probably had in the ceiling to deter pickpockets, but she wouldn't have it.

"I've been doing this for years," Sasha said. "I just stare at the floor, use my peripherals to make sure I'm not near any mirrors. We're away from her now. She won't find us unless one of us looks directly into one. Or we sing that fucking song in our sleep. I don't even remember where I first heard the thing. Supposedly it was some nonsense her E-ed out self babbled into the mirror as she died." She muttered something that sounded like "stupid" before turning her back and walking into the store.

Standing there at the pump, Grant felt horribly exposed. He shivered every time a car passed out on the road, the early morning sun glinting off their side view mirrors. He kept thinking how glad he was that his car didn't have chrome bumpers. It kept him from thinking about other things. Like how exactly life was going to work from here on out.

Sasha returned with bags stuffed with water, protein bars, and chips. "I bought all their bananas," she said, tearing one off the bushel and handing it to Grant.

Grant could only think about eating in the most academic of terms. He knew he'd have to eat, eventually, but he couldn't picture himself doing it.

"Thanks," he said, setting the banana on the dash. "I'll eat it later."

They drove through the mountains and down into the desert, neither entirely sure where they were going. Sometimes they talked, never of the thing that pursued them or their future, but trivialities of the past. Teachers they'd had, jobs they'd hated, television shows they'd seen as children. This time Sasha did most of the talking, Grant savoring every detail.

A few miles over the Arizona border, a siren blared. Grant craned his neck, caught the red and blue lights behind them.

"Damn it," he said. "I'm barely over the speed limit."

"Maybe they're looking for us."

"What? Why?"

"Your neighbor. All that screaming, somebody was bound to call the police."

Grant swallowed hard. He pulled to the shoulder, rolling down his window before killing the engine. He wanted to bang his head against the steering wheel until he lost consciousness and hopefully wake up in a world that actually made sense.

He pawed through the glove box for his papers. "I don't have my new insurance card."

They waited for the cop to come, hoping they'd simply fallen into a speed trap, that they weren't the subject of an APB. Without a rearview mirror, it was difficult to watch the cop's progress as he went through all his cop rituals.

Finally, the cop got out of his car. Heavy footsteps approached. Grant nervously fingered the papers in his lap.

"License, registration, and insurance, please."

Grant handed it through the window without looking. "I don't have my insurance card. Can I just look it up on my phone?"

The cop said nothing for a moment, then, "Do you know why I stopped you?"

Grant looked up at the cop, saw himself reflected in a pair of mirrored sunglasses.

He opened his mouth to reply, but the fingernails lunging from the cop's shades silenced him.

THE GROWTH

SANDRA STEPHENS

Some mushrooms will kill you, while some will show you gods and some will feed the hunger in our bellies. Identify.
~Neil Gaiman

THEY WERE A GOOD FORTY minutes from the cabin when she felt the first drop of rain on her face. She knew without checking her backpack that it did not contain her light jacket or rain hat—she could picture them sitting on the counter near the door where she'd left them—just as surely as she knew without checking Jack's backpack that he had both. After ten years married to a mountain man, Sarah Wills still sometimes felt like a stranger in a strange land.

Like many people born into cities, she had an instinctive fear of the woods. She read the stories of lost souls wandering the woods with a morbid interest, like the woman who lived nineteen days in the wilderness,

all the while just half a mile from the trail. She wasn't ready for the solitude beyond the path, the journalist had written about the dead woman, a sentence that gave Sarah the shivers.

Now she was following Jack, a Michigan Wolverine who walked in that forehead-leading way of the natural woodsman, cutting face-first through the mountain air like a blade. Their black Labrador Buckminster Fuller—Buck for short—ranged ahead, occasionally circling back to check in before taking his own course again.

"Find yourself someone who loves you like Buck loves Jack," Sarah liked to say. She knew Buck would do anything to protect her, but his heart belonged to Jack. If Jack went for a mountain bike ride, Buck barked to join. In the evening, if they watched a movie, Buck would lay with his head in Jack's lap. His confidence in Jack was total.

Then again, so was her own. She watched Jack's long straight back, striding the single-track trail ahead of her. He was, as always, perfectly dressed for whatever might happen. Whereas every item of preparedness Sarah herself owned was a gift from Jack, even the knife she kept clipped to the pocket of her pants.

She consoled herself that she had a good reason for leaving the cabin so ill-equipped; she'd been distracted. The reason for her distraction was also back at the cabin: a pregnancy test, waiting in the upstairs bathroom. The answer was just a formality. Getting pregnant wasn't the problem—staying pregnant was.

She had just peed on the stick when Jack's voice floated up from downstairs, asking did she want to go on a hike?

"May take up to ten minutes if you have not missed your period," according to the instructions. The box said nothing about how long the wait would be with just one ovary and time running out.

The test had an LED window that would display the answer. Something about it reminded her of the Magic Eight Ball her brother had as a kid, the way the answer floated into view—and the archaic locution—made its pronouncements seem fateful.

Once, sick with strep throat, she had memorized all the answers on the icosahedron die floating up from the mysterious blue depths.

Magic Eight Ball, will I carry this one to term? *Ask again later.*

By the time they returned from their hike, the answer would be showing in the window. In fact, it was there already, her fate unseen but decided. Most likely.

When the second cold drop struck her face, Jack stopped and pulled his bucket hat from the top of his pack, stowed where he could reach it without looking. It was waxed cotton, fleece-lined, just the ticket to stay dry and warm in a chilly spring rain in the mountains.

“Got your rain jacket?” Jack asked. Sarah flushed and shook her head. Somewhere close by, Buck barked.

“He’s in the woods,” Sarah said, glad to change the subject. “Remember all the ticks he got last time?” In the brief silence between Buck’s barks, the intermittent patter of raindrops could be heard.

“Let’s head back,” Jack decided. He gave a long low whistle, but Buck did not come bounding into view. Later, she would think that was the moment she’d predicted five years earlier from a hospital bed, recovering from surgery and waiting for the biopsy results.

“No one ever knows it while it’s happening,” she’d grumbled.

“What’s that?” Jack asked, taking her hand.

“The last normal day. You never know it’s your last normal day while it’s happening—you only recognize it after the fact.”

For her, that fact was an ectopic pregnancy, which ended almost as soon as it began, before either knew quite what to make of the impending little stranger—a phrase her mother used that made Sarah wince. “Maybe it’s just not meant to be,” she’d told Sarah after the surgery. But Jack was sanguine.

“Babe, you haven’t had your last normal day. Far from it. We have a whole lifetime.”

He was right, of course. The biopsy was benign. The tumor that had caused the ectopic pregnancy left no malignant footprints; the old normal returned. She went back to writing her book, back to running the trails. She looked the same, her body worked the same; the doctor said she could still get pregnant with her one remaining ovary, “If that’s in the cards for you two.” When she got the publishing contract, she started to think maybe it could be.

But she was right, too. She wanted to stay bored by normality—she wanted to wallow in it. Not for her the acquiescence of the stoics. How had Edna St. Vincent Millay put it? She did not approve; she was not resigned.

They rounded a bend in the trail and spotted Buck in a meadow by a tree that had sheared off about fifteen feet from the ground. The remaining trunk was a hoary, dead-looking thing. Sarah was always surprised by the messiness of nature, with branches and boulders and rotting pinecones littering the forest floor, and trees lying haphazardly where they fell, as if a giant had stomped through the forest in a rage, flailing arms smashing everything in its path to the ground.

Jack pulled back the fallen branches that interested Buck. A miasma of rotten animal drifted up.

“Ugh,” said Sarah. Lying under the branch was the decomposed corpse of a beaver. Mushrooms had taken root in its exploded stomach, pushing up through what was left of the animal’s intestines. Where its eyes had been, more mushrooms bulged, giving it a look of eyes rolled back to the whites in the agony. Sarah turned her eyes away at the sight.

“What killed it?” Sarah stepped back, the stench lessening only a little.

“No tracks,” Jack mused. He gestured with his foot at the burst-open belly. “A bear or coyotes would’ve eaten this part. Maybe it ate a poison bait, crawled here to die.”

A ferny-looking plant had seeded itself at the jagged top of the remaining trunk, like a hairpiece. About halfway up—a few feet higher than Sarah, the trunk bulged outward with a bulbous belt—a growth of some sort.

“What is that?” Sarah wondered, more to herself than asking.

“Looks like a mushroom of some type,” Jack said.

“I thought that they grew under trees.” Sarah flapped her arms in mock exasperation. Just another example of the weird ways nature was always surprising her.

“Mushrooms grow everywhere,” Jack said absently, inspecting the tree. “I’m pretty sure shiitakes grow like this.”

“Except shiitakes don’t look like tree acne,” Sarah said. The caps did resemble big pimples, round and a darkish tan flesh tone.

Jack pulled out his knife and flicked the blade in a smooth, practiced movement she’d seen thousands of times—he was a boy from the Upper Peninsula. The blade flashed dully, the same color of the flat gray afternoon light.

Jack pressed the tip into one of the growths. The skin indented slightly. The entire band of bulbous growths seemed to ripple.

He turned his eyes toward Sarah, and they shared one of those moments of marital telepathy.

Did you see that?!

A raindrop struck Sarah's forehead with a cold plink.

"We should get going," she reminded him. Drops were falling with more regularity now. The breeze had picked up, setting the aspen leaves dancing.

Jack nodded, and as his eyes turned back to the knife tip—which was no longer touching the mushroom, Sarah would have sworn to it—one of the mushroom pimples popped open, sending a thin contrail of spores into the air. Jack quick-stepped backward, bending over with a hand to his right eye.

"Ouch," he said. "Bark in my eye."

Sarah handed him her water bottle, feeling a flash of gratitude that she'd remembered to fill it up. He poured a steady stream of water into his eye, head tipped back, fingers holding his eye open.

"Better?" she asked, and he nodded, putting his sunglasses on.

"Let's head back," he said and swung his lanky frame down the trail, whistling for Buck, who fell in step behind his right heel, Sarah pulling up the rear. The sky spit at them the whole way, but the real rain held off, and they made it back to the cabin in plenty of time, with Sarah only moderately damp.

"How about I start dinner while you shower?" she suggested, and Jack nodded. Once he was outside busy with the grill, she could steal upstairs to read their future in the LED window.

She felt a thrill of nerves at the thought. It wasn't her own response she feared, but Jack's—she could handle his happiness at a yes, but what if he was just as happy at a no? Was she?

Cannot predict now.

SINCE HER SURGERY, EVERYTHING HAD GONE BACK TO NORMAL IN THE SEX department…but they'd gradually stopped talking about children. With each passing birthday, Sarah felt the likelihood of children slipping away, a feeling like a tide going out. She knew Jack would be his normal easygoing self no matter what. If he felt any regret about children—or no children—he wouldn't tell her.

When she slipped into the bathroom for her turn in the shower, Jack was at the mirror, a towel around his waist. As he angled the shaving mirror toward his face and wiped the steam away, Sarah caught sight of his eye and gave an involuntary gasp.

"Jack, your eye!" she said.

The mirror was the kind that magnified, turning pimples and sunspots into gargantuan deformities. The effect on Jack's lower lid, pulled down to reveal a raw-looking pulp, was almost monstrous. His upper lid was swollen, the supratarsal crease disappeared.

The left eye, gray-blue, looked at her. He didn't seem worried, but it was hard to read his expression.

"I flushed it out," he said. "The swelling should start going down." The sclera of his magnified eye looked thickened, threaded with red.

At dinner, she thought his quietness was due to the food—ribeye was his favorite. But he ate almost listlessly.

"Not hungry?" she asked. He put down his fork as if he'd been waiting for permission.

“I’ve got a mother of a headache,” he said. “I think I’ll lie down for a bit.”

“I’ll bring you an ice pack.”

When she entered the bedroom, it was dark, Jack’s face in the shadow of his forearm. There was the brief shine of the hall light reflecting off his good eye, looking at her. He replaced his arm with the proffered ice pack, his good eye closed.

“If it’s not better by tomorrow, I’ll take you to the clinic,” Sarah said.

“It’s better now,” Jack grunted. “Can you get rid of that light? It’s killing me.”

After clearing up their dishes, Sarah retrieved her laptop and Googled “cornea scratch.” She felt relief reading how common it was. The listed symptoms were spot on—light sensitivity, headache. The entry was stern: “An abraded epithelium creates an open wound that increases your risk of a serious eye infection. See an eye doctor immediately if you suspect you have a corneal abrasion.”

By the time she slipped into bed, he was breathing heavy sleep-breaths that didn’t pause at her whispered, “Jack?”

No answer. A bright, almost-full moon looked in through the window.

“There were no maggots,” came his disembodied voice.

Sarah startled awake. She had fallen asleep without realizing it. It was dark in the room; the moon had long since moved past the window.

“Jack?” she asked. “You okay?” She rolled over onto her right side. He was facing the wall. She fit herself against him like a puzzle piece.

“There were no maggots.” Jack’s voice came from the dark, his voice sleep-furred, thick. “It was dead, but there were no maggots.”

She thought he must be dreaming, but then he rolled over, rolling her with him so now she was the inside puzzle piece, his hands on her hips. She snuggled her shoulders against him and was starting to drift off again when the hand on her hip moved to her breast, cupping it.

Beneath his exploring fingers, her breasts were sore, the same way they had been with the first pregnancy. The risk of having another ectopic pregnancy would be one in ten, now, according to her doctor.

Outlook not so good.

She arched backward into him as he entered her. His languid rhythm rocked her almost back to sleep. After, he stayed inside of her a long time, a

tickling feeling like an icicle melting. She drifted off, shifting away from the wet spot pooling beneath her.

IN THE MORNING, JACK'S SIDE OF THE BED WAS EMPTY, THE BLANKET neatly pulled up. The early morning quiet was punctuated by the rat-a-tat-tat of a woodpecker. She knew from the silence of the cabin he wasn't in it, was off on his daily mountain bike ride, Buck running heroically in his wake.

Through the kitchen window she saw distant wooly gray clouds lowering over the lake, promising more rain. She decided a quick trip to the bakery was in order. Jack would be pleased to come home from his ride and find their Saturday ritual—coffee, croissants, and the newspaper—ready and waiting.

The bakery smelled of coffee and bread, the big walk-in ovens with their slow-turning racks making a low and somehow warm whooshing sound. The owner, Kelly—a big woman in a floury black apron and the perpetually ruddy cheeks of rosacea—asked after Buck and handed Sarah a bag with a ham bone in it.

"This will make his day—his weekend," Sarah said, and as they laughed together, a movement from deep within the saddle of her pelvis tickled her. A wave of nausea washed over her. She froze. It was a feeling she remembered. Often, the first warning signs of an ectopic pregnancy were light vaginal bleeding and pelvic pain.

“You okay?” Kelly asked. She glanced at Sarah’s hand, which had moved automatically to the place over the movement, just below her navel.

“Pain a four,” Sarah said, thinking the joke would get lost in translation, but Kelly, expert in all things bread and ovens, translated effortlessly. Bun in the oven. Her red face broke into a wide smile that made her look unexpectedly pretty. She came around the counter and hugged Sarah, enveloping her in a mix of smells: yeast, rosemary, soap.

“It’s still early,” Sarah said. “We lost the last one.” Suddenly on the edge of tears, she gave an embarrassed little laugh.

Kelly hugged her again. “It’s never too early for happy news,” she said. “Give Jack my love.”

But Jack wasn’t back yet. Sarah thought of her paddleboard with longing. Always more of a water nymph than a wood nymph, there was nothing she loved more than stroking to the center of the lake in the quiet of early morning, gliding along the glass-like surface, laying back on the board with the sky spread out above her. But with a quick look at the gray eye of the sky, she reluctantly let the idea go—the mistiness would soon become rain. Besides, she wanted to be at the cabin when Jack returned.

She opened her laptop, and last night’s Google search on mushrooms greeted her.

Many people don’t know that the largest organism on earth is not a blue whale, but a mushroom, she read.

The article, by a university mycologist, described the armillaria ostoyae, or honey mushroom, which grew from a single spore to cover 2400 acres, the same size as one thousand football fields.

A quote from the mycologist caught her eye. If humans become extinct, fungi would definitely be the dominant life form on earth—the biggest, the most widespread, the most diverse.

There was a thump on the roof and the scrabbling sound of a pinecone rolling to the ground. Sarah jumped a little, then laughed at herself.

Where was he?

She knew he would act happy—would be happy. If he had regrets, he wouldn’t share them, not unless she went first. Did she?

For once, her inner eight ball voice was quiet.

She decided to kill time with some yard work. The backyard was filled with pinecones—the perfect kindling. She changed into her flannel shirt and

yesterday's pants, still with the knife clipped to the side. That said pants were left crumpled on the floor was as usual for her as Jack's discarded towel was unusual for him.

Even more unusual were Jack's biking clothes, wadded beneath the towel.

She stared at them: the jersey, the padded shorts, the mid-calf socks. They were as familiar to her as her own clothes, maybe more familiar—Jack biked almost daily; this outfit was like a second skin.

The question was, why were they here? If Jack was biking, wouldn't he be wearing them?

The jersey was dry; she pressed it to her nose, a latent sachet of Jack that told her nothing. The thought that he'd finished his ride, come home, showered, and taken Buck out to the lake while she was at the bakery crossed her mind like a comet, dismissed almost before it was fully formed.

Very doubtful.

Of course, he was out riding; he took Buck out with him nearly every day. A bike ride explained their absence perfectly. But what explained Jack's bike clothes on the floor?

Ask again later.

She thought she recognized the magic eight ball voice now—it was the voice of her mom, always a little doubtful, never quite believing anything Sarah told her.

Maybe all of that could change now, she thought, hand on her stomach, almost unaware of the bitter, knowing little smile that twisted her lips at the thought. *Don't count on it.*

AN HOUR LATER, THE PINECONE KINDLING BASKET WAS FILLED. SHE STOOD and stretched, arms over her head, cracking her spine. Soon enough, she'd be hearing "Don't overdo it!" warnings from everyone. As she bent to lift the basket of cones, her glance fell, almost casually, on a pair of yellow eyes staring at her from beneath the deck.

Her heart lurched, but almost immediately she saw, in the shadowy crawl space, the shape of pendant ears, a glimmering, white-sprinkled muzzle.

Buck was under the deck.

She got down on her knees to get a better look at him. There was a disturbance of leaves as Buck briefly wagged his tail.

Sarah stared at him, for a moment too surprised to think—it was as if her thoughts had been walking along and slammed into a brick wall, falling down together in a jumbled pile.

Since he was a puppy, Buck liked to crawl under things to keep cool. They let him have his way on most things, as it should be with dogs who so plainly are and want to be good. But on crawling under the deck, Jack was stern.

"There's all kinds of stuff under there—old rusty nails, rocks, fleas, and ticks. Also, snakes. Also, dead maggoty chicories…"

"Okay, I'm convinced!" She'd shaken her finger at the deck, then in front of Buck's nose. No, they told him. No, no, no, you can't go under. Now here he was.

Gazing at him, she felt a cramp of irritation, a feeling she knew Jack never had. Buck always obeyed Jack, and when he took his time, Jack never raised his voice or stamped a foot to hurry him along, as Sarah so often did.

Once, she dreamed Buck was swimming after a ball in the bay; she called him, but he'd swum too far to hear her, his head barely visible between the cresting waves. She awoke to a pillow wet with tears, Jack asleep next to her, Buck calmly curled at their feet, everyone dry and safe.

"He would have come back if you'd been the one calling," she said accusingly. Jack's laugh had been all she needed for confirmation.

It is decidedly so.

"Buck?" She peered under the deck. It was an effort to keep her voice calm; it wanted to gallop away with her. "Hey buddy, what are you doing under there? Come out!"

Buck emitted a low-pitched whine but did not move.

"Come on out, Buck! Now!" She tried to keep her voice stern but found the pitch would not come down. He had scared her, looking out at her like that, lying under there all this time without her realizing. Worry paced inside her.

"Buck, where's Jack?" she asked sharply.

At the sound of Jack's name, Buck's pendant ears pitched forward, but his nose stayed on his paws.

Her mind raced. If Buck had come back from the ride without Jack… that meant Jack had crashed his bike, bad enough to hurt the bike, maybe even himself. She pictured him lying halfway down a ravine twisted in his bike frame like a centaur, a wheel spinning slowly in the quickening breeze. Adrenaline squirted through her.

"Buck, let's go! Let's go get Jack," she called. But Buck stayed in the crawlspace.

She decided it didn't matter. She knew the trail well enough—she could take the Bobcat with the big tires straight up any hillside.

She'd need a first aid kit, an emergency blanket, a bungee to secure the bike. All items that Jack kept on his workbench. She opened the door connecting directly from the living room to the garage, flicking on the overhead bulb, feeling her thoughts cut off cleanly at the sight of Jack's mountain bike leaning rakishly on its stand.

Hey there, it seemed to be saying. *Want to go for a ride?*

Sarah stared at it. Fear, like Carl Sandburg's fog, entered on little cat feet, filling her stomach with its cold smoke.

If Jack's bike was here, where was Jack? She looked around the garage, but it gave her no clue.

The bike waited.

Sarah tried to focus. The pattering of the rain on the roof was loud out here, making it hard to think. Her thoughts flapped like birds trapped in a room, circling and circling.

It was raining and Jack wasn't home.

Jack wasn't home and he wasn't on his bike.

Jack wasn't home and he wasn't on his bike and she didn't know where he was.

Outside, thunder rumbled.

It was the sound of Buck howling that brought the answer crashing into her. From the crawlspace, Buck's howl sounded both close and distant.

Buck was under the deck because Jack was under the deck. Without a doubt.

Distantly she felt pain, like heat lightning, flickering in her womb.

Buck's muffled howl came again, galvanizing her through the cabin, out the back door and across the deck, already calling Jack's name. Rain spattered down. She threw herself onto the ground and peered under the deck. Buck had moved farther back, a shadow among shadows.

Was one of those shadows Jack?

"Jack!" she called. "Jack, are you there?" She crawled forward on her elbows, spreading herself flat and pushing herself forward with the tips of her shoes. The first push brought her halfway under the deck, rain tattooing the backs of her legs. A second push brought her fully under. Streams of water trickled through the deck cracks onto her neck.

"Where's Jack, Buck? Where's Jack?" At the sound of Jack's name, Buck howled again, a lonesome sound that ratcheted her fear another level.

She pulled herself deeper in, digging with her elbows. The smell of decades' worth of rotting leaves, animal hair, and shit filled her nose.

Buck howled again. She heard his back legs scrabble in the leaves as he retreated from her.

She crawled after him, her elbows printed with sharp stones and sticks. It began to rain harder, drops hitting the deck with a sound like applause.

The stench worsened, a wormy wet smell of decay and earth. Her back scraped on the long cross beams latticing the underside of the deck.

She lifted up on her forearms to look beyond Buck's sturdy body, smashing her head hard enough on the underside of the deck to see black flowers bloom in front of her eyes. Between them, she saw her husband.

A feeling of deep unreality washed over her.

He lay with his back toward her, curled on his side in a shallow depression, his face stained with dirt like a child taken suddenly by sleep. He had covered himself with a blanket of leaves and earth. His right hand drifted behind him, pale and motionless.

"JACK?!" she cried. "Jack, Jack!" The rain thrummed on the deck above her. Buck howled with her.

At the cold touch of Jack's hand, she cried out again, an inarticulate sound that set Buck howling in chorus.

"Oh god, Buck, shut UP!" she shrieked. Like a jellyfish dreaming, Jack's hand moved in hers. She felt for his pulse but wasn't sure if the rapid, thready beat was hers or his.

"Jack! Jack, can you hear me?" Panic was sparking now. The immediate task, she told herself, was to get him moved, get him inside, out of the wet and into the dry. Out of the inexplicable and into the understood.

But underneath it all, like a metronome, a question beat in time with her heart now smashing within her: What the fuck? What the fuck? What the FUCK?

She brushed leaves and dirt off of him and found he was wearing only the t-shirt and boxers he'd worn to bed last night, filthy and wet. A picture rose in her mind, Jack on his knees in the rain, tunneling under the deck, his long t-shirted back startling in the darkness. He was out here all night. Dear god, was he out here ALL NIGHT? The panic spread inside her like a grassfire now.

Stretched out under a blanket on the couch in front of the fireplace with a mug of tea steaming on the table before him, there would be a story that made all of this make sense. The fear hollowing her out, the confusion at finding her husband in a crawlspace underneath the house where he'd apparently slept all night in the rain could be somehow explained away, laughed at.

“Babe. It’s me, it’s Sarah. I’m here, babe. Wake up, Jack, it’s me, it’s Sarah. Wake UP, Jack.” She shook him, her voice cracking with sobs.

“Sarah.” Jack made a low gargling sound. Relief washed through her.

“We have to get you inside, Jack. You can’t be out here like this.” Her voice was normal in volume, but it was screaming, too. Buck howled.

His voice was low and choked, like a tire without enough air.

“Shhhhh,” he told her. “‘S okay.”

“Jack, what’s happening? Jack, you can’t be out here like this!” The rain drummed. Buck howled.

“Shhhuddy,” Jack said. Shhh buddy. With a deep groan, Buck lay his long nose across Jack.

“Jack, what the fuck!” The rain mixed with Sarah’s tears.

A rattling sound in his throat, like leaves shifting. “Lishen,” he said.

She pressed her lips against his hand, which gleamed pale and ghostly in the earth-smelling dark.

“Hurrrrrrts,” he moaned.

“Jack, I don’t understand what you’re doing out here!” If only Buck would stop howling. She succeeded in shifting him an inch and wedged herself closer to Jack’s head.

“You…have to kinnit,” he grunted. His speech was muffled, as if he were talking and swallowing at the same time.

“I don’t understand,” Sarah cried. “Jack, what are you saying?”

“Kih-hill—it,” Jack repeated, louder, with obvious effort. Kill it.

“Kill what, Jack?”

He groaned again. Buck howled. Sarah turned on him savagely. “SHUT UP, Buck! SHUT UP!”

“Dun yeh,” Jack said, and something about the way he said it, Sarah understood. Don’t yell, he was telling her. Don’t yell at Buck.

“I’m sorry!” Sarah cried. “Jack, I don’t know what you want me to do.” She clutched his shoulder, felt the coldness of him. She tried to quell the panic that wanted to break free.

“We have to get you inside, Jack.”

“Ooo ate.” Too late. With difficulty, he turned his head to see her better. She saw the muscles at the back of his neck, at forty-five still smooth and unlined as a boy’s, become a taut chord. She saw his left eye, gray as the sky, straining up to see her, squinching against the stream of drops

spattering down, the sclera cloudy and threaded red. His face moved only a degree or so, enough that his head cleared the ground, enough so that Sarah could see where his right eye had been, a bulbous mushroom cap now bulged. A forest of long black filaments extruding from the naked pink socket connected his face tightly to the ground.

She recoiled, smashing her head against the deck's underside for the second time. This time the flowers were red, exploding like fireworks, mercifully blotting out the sight of her husband's face, but not before she saw his gray right eye with its gunshot pupil looking up at her from amid the tendrils tangled on the ground.

SHE CAME BACK TO CONSCIOUSNESS WITH THE SOUND OF BUCK HOWLING. IT was colder. In the time she'd been out, the rain had stopped. In the west, the sun had dropped below the horizon. The sky was still bright with remembered sunlight, but shadows had already gathered in the space beneath the deck.

In her unconsciousness, she had collapsed and slid down Jack's back in a nightmarish parody of spooning.

"Jack," she croaked. Her throat was raw. "Jack, can you hear me?"

She held his hand in both of hers, chafing it. *Reply hazy, try again*.

"Ar-ah." Sarah. His fingers curling in hers with the effort.

"I'm here, Jack."

His voice gargled with dirt. “Eern ith…ooh ah oo eern ith.” Burn it. You have to burn it.

“Burn it,” Sarah repeated. The mushroom, he meant.

“Dun eh ih spehed.” Don’t let it spread. He wheezed, gagging. “Hod to tok.” Hard to talk.

She squeezed fingers cold and white as bone.

His eye—still Jack’s eye, gray as gunmetal—rolled up to her. The chords stood out on his neck. “Take ‘cat. Gas.” He choked. She saw the long black filaments extending from his mouth. In a rage of disgust, she clawed them away, tearing them free from their moorings under his tongue. They came away easily, forming a black bolus of glistening muck she shook from her hand with little cries of revulsion.

The sound of his breathing was less labored, his speech clearer.

“Sarah.” His hand, fish-cold, in hers.

“You have to stop it. It’s conscious. Fast.” The words garbled, clods of vowels forced out of his mouth. His remaining eye rolled up again, bulging, searching her out. Another growth was forcing it forward in its socket, bugging it out so that he looked as terrified as she felt. Up close, she could see how the eye was rolling, disconnected. In the darkness under the deck, she wondered if he could even see her.

“I’ll stop it, Jack,” she said with a calm she didn’t feel.

His head was resting on the ground now, the neck muscles limp. His face, free of the tendrils, rested in shadow. His good eyelid twitched, slitted open. A final spear of sunset light slipped through the crack, illuminating the shade of gray she once defined as somewhere between stormy weather and gray-eyed man of destiny.

“Good girl,” he whispered. With the muck out of his mouth, she could understand him better. She saw he was trying to smile.

Nausea closed its noose around her stomach. She made a final try for normalcy, pulling his chilled white hand against it.

“Don’t leave us, Jack. You hear me? You can’t leave us. Not now. We need you now. You’re going to be a daddy, Jack.”

His eye opened, tipped upward. Both the upper and lower lid were puffy, the sclera thickened.

“Love. You,” he gasped.

“Jack,” she whispered. The rain mixed warmly with her tears.

“Uh-ree,” he said. Hurry.

She pushed herself out with her arms and knees pressed flat, careless of the sharp things that bit and tore into her palms and elbows and knees, the fecund smell of the earth slicking her throat with every breath.

Moments later she was pulling herself up from the ground outside of the deck.

She ran into the cabin, heedless of mud and leaves caked on her shoes and falling in clumps from her clothing. Her thoughts were like horses kicking their stall doors as fire raged around them. Jack under the house. His face, his eye, his FUCKING EYE WAS ON THE GROUND.

She grabbed the bedspread off the bed, opened the closet where they kept camping supplies and found a groundsheet for the tent, and raced back outside. The trees made dark shapes against the last light in the sky. The air was purpled with twilight as she wormed her way through the crawlspace muck to Jack’s side, calling his name like a prayer.

His closed left eye bulged strangely, beneath the pale, purpled lid. Nearby, Buck panted rapidly, his tongue five times its normal size with the growth, a webbing of black tendrils anchoring his mouth, so gentle it could hold live birds, to the ground. Though he whined with pain every tenth breath or so, his golden eyes—one of them protruding oddly—did not shift from Jack’s face.

Dear god, it was so fast.

Sarah dragged the comforter over them, then the tarp, cursing as she scraped her sore head against the underside of the deck.

Jack made a strangling sound; she reached into his mouth and pulled more of it out, gagging as some of the soft sponginess of his tongue came away in her fingers.

“Jack,” she wept. “I don’t know what’s happening.” She lay on her side next to him, pressing her body against his length.

“Aaaaave ay eeee,” Jack grunted out. “Ay eeeee,” he repeated. Baby. Was he saying save the baby? She reached behind his neck and found more of the tendril vines between his back and the ground.

She thought he was going to say something else, but he didn’t. There was a long susurrating exhale. His left eyelid was swollen huge and smooth, like the statues in Italy with their blind eyes of expressionless marble.

Everything was happening so fast, but also in a kind of slow motion. Like the moments in a car accident when things were spinning out of control but before impact.

She backed out, the now unfamiliar shapes of Jack and Buck melting into shadows as she crawled away from them. She emerged into the violet light of sundown. The rain had stopped. Water dripped musically from the trees, the gutters, the deck.

The Bobcat had an open wagon in the back and tough all-terrain tires. Once a year they took it back into the canyon with Jack's chainsaw and cut up firewood for the coming winter. Now, the motor rumbled into life, deafening in the cramped confines of the shed, barely larger than the vehicle. Her nose was filled with the bouquet of diesel. She hefted the two red plastic five-gallon gas cans against the wall into the open wagon and lurched out of the shed, nearly turning turtle in the culvert at the edge of the property. But at last, the wheels gripped a tree root and she was on the road and speeding toward the trailhead.

It was darker under the tree cover, shades of night in the shadows. The slight twisting pain in her uterus recurred, sharper and longer. She was only a half-mile down the trail when she spotted the growth on a young fir tree. Trees, actually—the growth was on a pine here, an aspen there. She looked doubtfully at the cans of gasoline. She'd have to reach up and remove the growth if she were going to burn it—she couldn't burn the growth on the tree without starting a forest fire.

The slight, twisting uterine pain was becoming more constant, like moderately bad cramps from her period. Sarah firmly ignored it and continued her route down the trail, gradually slowing the 'cat, then stopping altogether, her heart pounding.

In spite of everything, it was hard to take in what she was seeing. Hard to accept it as real.

There was, again, a sense of time going simultaneously fast and slow.

The growth was everywhere. It had spread to at least half the trees she could see from the trail; an open meadow where she had once spotted an eight-point buck was now half-obliterated by a dense mat of fungus.

If she'd once found the forest messy and unkempt, the growth had taken care of that—the thick rounded, dirty-beige mushroom caps overlapped like the scales of some giant, sprawling animal. It formed a blanket over

everything on the ground; fallen logs and boulders were vague humps beneath a carpet of fungus. It climbed up the trunks of trees and coated the branches, making them look eerily like fleshy human arms, bulbous with tumorous growths.

As she looked, the vast carpet of growth seemed to ripple. She flashed on the memory of Jack, lanky and handsome, his knife touching one of those growths, their shared thought, *Did you see that*?!

She knew two things without consciously thinking them, the knowing blooming in her like some nightshade flower, poisoning everything.

Jack was dying, and ten gallons wouldn't be enough.

She found a lighter in the Bobcat center console and pocketed it with a silent thanks to Jack. She unscrewed the plastic safety cap, the smell of gas sharp in her nose. It wasn't until she walked up the trail to a little bend a safe distance past the Bobcat that the utter, total silence of the forest hit her. There was no birdsong, no chittering of squirrels or woodpeckers pecking. No high-pitched whine of mosquitos, though this was their hour, and she was sticky with sweat. Absence ruled the woods.

Once, after several big snowstorms, she snowshoed the trail, confident she could find her way to the canyon creek just two miles in. But under the featureless snow, she had quickly become disoriented, her tracks quickly covered. The silence then had been like this, the natural world hushed beneath a smothering blanket, leaving her like the last woman on a dead and barren earth.

The growth had achieved full coverage here, a wave of obscenely humped brown-beige mushroom caps, some the size of her palm, some the size of her head, some glimpsed farther uptrail even larger. She tilted her head up, seeing how the tree trunks wore long flowing skirts of growth, their limbs draped in clingy sleeves of growth.

There was an alien majesty to it.

What had her doctor called it while she waited for her biopsy to find out if her little stranger was actually cancer? The emperor of all maladies.

The gas can glugged as she circled the base of trees and dumped it along the length of fallen logs, indistinct lumps under the growth. Almost immediately the diesel soaked into the caps, making it impossible to see where she'd splashed it—there was no moisture anywhere. Even the smell was dissipating. She drove the cat to the bend in the trail. To the left and

right and through the windshield, she saw nothing but a sea of growth that flowed across the landscape like fungal diarrhea.

Opening the second gas can, she poured a quarter into the bed of the ‘cat, splashing the rest around the wheels and sides. The pain in her uterus tightened unbearably for a moment, doubling her over.

The snick of the lighter was loud in the great, indifferent silence. She tossed it into the wagon, the diesel whooshing up in an orange column of flame that quickly raced down the sides of the ‘cat and spread to either side of the trail. Then she took off, running back the way she came; less than twenty yards and the gas tank of the ‘cat exploded, the force of the blast pushing at Sarah’s back with a warm, invisible hand. She staggered but stayed on her feet. As she ran, she glimpsed the growth scattered among the trees. Had it spread since she drove past?

She looked back only once, to see a massive pillar of black smoke billowing up above the trees. She wondered how long before someone called someone and the fire trucks started showing up.

SHE RAN THROUGH THE SPECTACULAR SUNSET LIGHT, THE CLOUDS WITH salmon underbellies, the trees bathed in the surreal pink haze of the Alpenglow. Nineteen minutes later and close to full dark, she pelted into the back yard, skidding on her knees into the deck, digging deep splinters into the palms of both hands. She could not make out Jack or Buck in the pitch darkness of the crawlspace, but she could hear a slow shifting of leaves.

She smelled it before she saw it, the way the growth had advanced to the point his mother wouldn't recognize him, would run screaming from a picture of him. Any hope that he could somehow survive this shriveled. His legs bicycled slowly, dreamily through the dead leaves. Beneath the blanket, the shape of his body had become lumpen. Black tendrils snaked their way up his neck and across the ledge of his cheek.

The growth that extended from his right eye now blanketed Buck's head and most of his shoulders and torso, which still bellowed in and out with his panting.

Jack's remaining eye was closed now, the lid swollen and strangely dented. At the sound of her voice, a movement flickered under the skin. The skin of his cheeks swelled ominously. A tendril peeped from beneath the lid and drew back. She moaned at that; at the sound of her voice, a slight swish in the leaves. Buck's tail.

She took the pale, dying starfish of his hand. She saw with an almost academic horror that the beds of his fingernails, black with dirt, had tiny shoots.

At the feel of her touch, Jack grunted. Black tendrils lurked in the shadows at the corner of his lips. She pulled at them. She gagged as she tore at the forest of the ones connecting his right eye socket to the ground. They seemed thicker, sturdier this time.

"I did it," she told him. "It's burning now, a big fire. But it was already…everywhere. Everywhere."

"Guh girl." His voice was hoarse, grated with dirt. Good girl.

"Jack we can still get you inside. We can…" Her voice, thin and watery, trickled to a stop. Even she wasn't convinced.

"You'll be a good mom," he told her, or maybe it was be a good mom. He would lose all speech soon—the growth was speeding up; she could feel the tendrils in his nailbeds tickling her palms. Still, she lay against him, unwilling to go.

He spoke only once more; his voice was both thicker and softer, the words mostly grunts.

"Ay ov you." I love you.

His hand in hers finally unmoving, his fingers like boiled hotdogs left to sit in water too long. Still his legs moved in slow motion circles.

She crawled out, backward, her eyes never leaving him, watching him merge into the earth-smelling dark. High above, the wind soughed through the high branches of the pines, shaking a rain of cold droplets down.

Knowing she had lived her last normal day, Sarah Willis grabbed the enormous can of kerosene from Jack's workbench. Like a sleepwalker, she doused the brown suede couch where they so often lounged before a fire watching movies. The new place would be smaller, she thought. With a couch that had a foldout bed.

She squirted a shallow pool on the wood table Jack had so lovingly restored. She pulled books from the bookcase by the handful; the tented covers piled together on the floor like a flock of crash-landed birds. The new place would have a built-in bookcase, filled with children's books with bright covers, and her own.

She splashed the dining room table and each of the eight chairs where they held a dinner party after getting married at the top of their favorite ski hill one cold, snowy winter afternoon. In the new place they'd need only a highchair and a small table that seated two. She would write there between meals and late at night. She'd write them a good life.

Definitely.

She was weeping now, the tears mixing freely with her sweat as she squirted the fireplace mantle, the lampshades. She backed up the staircase, squirting a path behind her, down the hallway and into the north-facing bedroom, liberally scoring the quilts and comforters and feather pillows—they would get new bedding, something modern. She trickled a trail through the connected bathroom to repeat the process in the south-facing bedroom.

She was stopped short by the magic eight ball window of the pregnancy test glowing blue in the dark.

She had forgotten to check it, once she thought she knew what it had to say. It had nevertheless done its job, reporting the results in glowing blue letters she could clearly read, even with the light off.

For a moment, her mind was wiped clean of all save one thought.

You were right, Mom.

If fear enters on little cat feet, horror washes in like a tidal wave. When it washed back out, it took everything with it, leaving her internal landscape barren except the question, how fast would it take her?

She didn’t realize she was going to vomit until the moment she fell to her knees and expunged her breakfast, the croissant and coffee ejected in a blackish, lumpy stream. She lay there for a time, cheek pressed against the rough wool carpeting. The sharp sting of kerosene as it glugged from the tin container kept her from passing out.

As she watched, a chunk in her vomit wobbled, then rolled slightly, a tiny stem pushing itself into being with the slow, implacable grandness of time-lapse photography.

That’s what’s inside me, she thought. A little stranger. She felt her sanity loosening then, a physical sensation.

Vomit splattered, filthy, her hair a nest of dead leaves and trailing the smell of kerosene, she made her final entrance into the room once dubbed by her husband as the room where all the magic happened. The odor hit her like a physical force, the rich organic stink of the growth now covering the bed, emanating from the wet spot where, less than twenty-four hours ago, she’d drifted to sleep in Jack’s arms, their fate already decided. The growth climbed the wall behind the bed; black tendrils stretched from its leading-edge onto the ceiling, the tips waving as if underwater.

As she stared, she felt a tendril in her vaginal canal trickle into her panties.

She screamed as she yanked her pants down to rip it out, screamed as she felt the corresponding tug deep in her uterus, screamed again at the sight of the fine webbing of black tendrils plastering her upper thighs like mold.

Once she started screaming, she found she couldn’t stop; it was as if she were screaming all the screams backed up inside of her since the moment yesterday when reality had swallowed normality, the moment Jack stood with his knife in hand and his dog at his feet, his grey eyes clear and smiling at her, a negative pregnancy test back at the cabin waiting to reveal its message.

Try again.

She hurled the pregnancy test on the center of the bed and upended the kerosene can, saturating the place where the stain from their lovemaking now fruited with large, spreading mushroom caps. Her screams pealed like bells. By the time she was lighting matches and tossing them onto the bed,

the splayed-open books, the pooled kerosene on the big wooden farm table, her voice was wrecked, the rising crackle of the fire replacing it.

She pushed out the back door, splashing the deck, the chairs with their cushions, the folded table umbrella leaning in the corner, never again to shade an al fresco lunch. The boards of the deck, she knew, were dry after seasons of drought—they would catch quickly.

Looking into the crawlspace, the darkness was complete—she could make out no shadow shapes. There was no sound but the kerosene drizzling down between the boards onto what was left of her good husband and his faithful dog.

She reached into her cargo pocket for her headlamp. The beam spread in an eldritch triangle of light, the kerosene falling in silvery streaks. The growth blanketed the ground, the caps of the individual mushrooms smaller at the edge of the deck, larger as they marched deeper under the deck. Largest of all where Jack and Buck were—had been—under all that growth.

The dark beneath the deck beckoned with the promise of sleep, of waking beneath the blanket to find this was all just a dream. *It will be coming out of his mouth now*, she thought, despite herself. *His nose. His ears. And Buck's.*

Were they still breathing? Could they hear her, sense her?

Better not tell you now.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," she said in her fractured voice.

The crawlspace was silent, filling with smoke.

She could feel it now, within her—the growth. A keen and foreign sensitivity fizzing through her blood. An otherness that was nevertheless part of her. In the light from her headlamp, she could see the tiny shoots sprouting around her fingernails. Rooted in her. Becoming her.

The distant sound of sirens. Surely fire trucks were at the trailhead now, calling in air support. It was a short trip from the trailhead to the cabin. She could just lie here, wait for them. What then?

The hospital, of course. They'd take her there, ignoring her warnings as the ravings of a lunatic. Sedated, feet in silver stirrups, the medical staff would cluster around in horror at her vulva exploding with strange fungal life force. Even as the growth burst her eyes from her head and crowded out of her mouth, they'd call in the specialists to study her, knees relaxed open and exhaling spores from her ominously bulging womb.

She thought of those doctors and nurses going from room to room, patient to patient, touching, injecting, breathing. Spreading the growth. To cancer patients, knee replacement recipients. The maternity ward. Bassinets lined up, baby legs kicking convulsively under the creeping growth.

Inside, a beam from the cabin's coffered ceiling fell with a thud that shook the deck and trembled the ground beneath her. The window over the kitchen sink exploded, sparks and shards of glass flying outward and burying itself in the ground all around her. *Coulda lost an eye*, she thought automatically. An image of Jack's eye staring at her from the ground rose up and she barked harsh laughter. Was she still sane?

My sources say no.

The sirens were closer now—unmistakably headed west, toward the cabin. Above her, the treetops leaned in, leaving only a patch of starless sky. What was she doing here, her, a city girl, dying alone in the forest?

"Not FAIR," she screamed, her broken voice like the floating scraps of burning paper drifting among the impassive trees. She watched those for a while, hypnotized.

Hey, babe, you can't stay here. An image of Jack, as clear as if he were in front of her. She could even see the way the glow of the flames from the kitchen window reflected on his skin.

It's the growth, she thought. *Jack is part of it now*. The thought brought with it a swamping sadness. Her eyes blurred, and she closed them. When she opened them, Jack was still there, and this time Buck sat at his feet, tongue hanging out the way it did after a long run, the kind that finished at the lake, her going straight in wearing her jog bra and running shorts, Buck leaping heroically off the end of the dock.

"I'm sorry I didn't save you," she said to them. At the sound of her voice, Buck's tail swished.

"You can see the stars from the lake," the Jack mirage suggested, inclining his chin with its just-starting-to-gray stubble toward the lake. He took a step away from her, looking over his shoulder, Buck rising up in excitement. *A Wolverine til the end*, she thought. Still leading her through the wilderness. She smiled a little at that. Besides, he was right. She knew what she had to do.

It would be easier if she could see the stars.

The garage was hot and hazy with smoke. Sweating, she wrestled the paddleboard onto its hand cart, the pain in her womb growing sharper as if in protest. Inside the cabin, she heard the insatiable roar of the fire. *By now the king-sized bed with its freight of growth will be burning*, she thought.

She encountered no people as she towed her board down to the lake. There were no streetlights; the road was more of a lane, used by locals. She could find her way blindfolded.

A half mile behind her, the fire trucks screamed their approach. Down by the lake, it was calm and dark. A bank of thick white clouds hid the moon. There would be no shimmerlane to follow like a storybook. It didn't matter.

She knelt in the center of the board, her paddling clumsy at first, striking the sides. Warming to the exercise, using the J stroke Jack had taught her, the paddle blade barely made a sound as it dipped in and out of the dark lake.

As she stroked toward the center, the air felt colder. When her arms grew tired, she dropped the anchor Jack had fashioned for her, just the thing for sunbathing without drifting too far from shore. Now it was just the thing to keep her from drifting back to shore.

She lay back on the board, searching the sky for stars amid the clouds. She shivered with cold and felt a sudden, yearning sorrow. She would never be warm again.

Was the line so thin, then, between dreams and waking? Between normal and sudden, grotesque change?

As I see it, yes.

She reached down and felt her knife, Jack's gift, clipped where it always was. The pain in her womb, flaring and so sharp she nearly dropped it.

Maybe it knows, she thought.

She remembered a story she'd read in middle school, about a Japanese soldier who committed ritual suicide by disemboweling himself. How surprised she'd been, that the teacher would let them read something so gory, and how mystified she'd been by the soldier, knowing she could never bring herself to do the same. Hari kari. Soldiers were expected to do it if they fell into the hands of an enemy.

One-handed, Sarah, now firmly in the hands of the enemy, released the safety on the blade of her Kershaw and flicked it fully open with a snap of

her wrist, a move she'd mastered specifically to impress Jack.

"Good girl," he'd told her, admiringly.

Hot tears flooded her eyes. Her hands were stiff, clumsy with cold. Real hari kari required a second, a person who, at the moment of greatest agony, would sever the head. In the story, this service was provided by the soldier's wife, who followed her husband into death.

Sarah, not a samurai's wife but a Michigan Wolverine's, drew a thin silver smile on her wrist. Transferring the knife to her left hand, the cold blade was less smooth but effective. A sudden cool kiss of air hit her wrists.

The day they took possession of the cabin, a snowstorm hit. They'd snowshoed out to the lake, breath puffing in white vapor clouds, the individual flakes of snow bright white in the cold, colorless air, the same air she floated through now.

"I love you, Jack," she told him, and he was here again, his eyes taking on the blue of his down jacket, the blue of the lake, the way gray eyes sometimes could. It was a vision so clear she could see the wind riffle his hair, the crinkly lines around his eyes. *Maybe it's the mushroom in me*, she thought. *Giving me hallucinations. Making it easier.*

She remembered lying next to him in bed, still damp from lovemaking, and kissing those lines for what felt like hours. The vision filled her eyes—for a heart-freezing second, she smelled the sheets, felt the thin winter sunlight filtering through the window—then shrank quickly, drifting far and fast away from her into darkness until it was only a tiny glowing speck, like a single star in an endless night sky.

Hours later, Sarah Wills opened her eyes a final time. The clouds had moved on, revealing stars like knife points, hard and white. A lassitude had come over her; Jack was pulling her back into bed for love. After breakfast they would hike to the ridge, Buck romping happily ahead of them, another normal day.

You may rely on it.

She smiled at the touch of his fingers on her face. Above them a star separated itself from the galaxy and fled east across the sky, melting as it went. Sarah's left eye followed it. The right was already enucleated, hanging down against her cheekbone, black tendrils winding amongst the orbital muscles. In the socket, a forest of tiny shoots nested.

"Beautiful," she whispered, or thought she did.

THE SUNRISE WAS VENETIAN, ALL FLUFFY WHITE CLOUDS WITH GOLDEN bellies sailing a cerulean sky. Chad Worth watched it from an Adirondack chair in the center of his sweeping lawn on the east shore of South Lake Tahoe, coffee mug in hand. With the sun fully risen, he could clearly see smoke on the northwest shore, significant enough he was considering going up to the house to check the local news when he saw, amongst the watercraft anchored just offshore, a largish something—a rowboat or kayak—drifting toward the beach. It was unmanned, he saw, moving on the power of deep currents from any one of the more than sixty streams that fed the lake.

He walked down the dewy, grassy slope and out on the dock. Here, thirty feet away, he could see it was a surfboard with something funny about its silhouette. At twenty feet away, he could see why: the board was covered with some kind of plant.

When it was ten feet away, he could now see it was a stand-up paddleboard; the plant growth had covered almost everything on the board except some yellow paint, but the blade end of a paddle and some of the shaft was still visible.

Something about the mass on the board, the vague shape it made, disturbed him.

It drifted past the end of the dock, less than a foot away. He saw the paddle was one of the expensive carbon fiber ones, top of the line. Without

really thinking, he reached for it, pulling it free of the mass of fungus that broke apart in chunks, revealing blackish, bloody stems and the human hand that still held the paddle with its ruined and blackened nails, a forest of mushrooms emerging from a lipless hole at the wrist.

He shouted—a sound of surprise, fear, and horror. As if in answer, more caps pushed out of the hand, unfolding their ragged umbrella shape, extruding long plumes of motes that danced in the golden early sunlight.

THE KELPIE OF LOCH NESS

Henry Herz

I wandered uphill along a sun-dappled hiking path from Loch Beinn a' Mheadhoin. I strode under fragrant Scots pines and rowans, but the legendary natural beauty of my surroundings had lost its magic. I loved nature, but my park ranger job, far less so—my thankless duties consisted mainly of rescuing rude lost hikers, stopping them from fishing illegally, and picking up trash left behind in the woods. But at least what my work lacked in professional gratification, it made up for with long periods of bleak solitude. The forest gloom had seeped into my outlook. I needed a change. I needed to find my true calling.

An unexpected patch of color pulled me from my reverie. A young man in a blue shirt lay face-up, half-covered by fallen leaves.

"Hello?" No response. I touched his hand. Cold. I checked for a pulse. Bloody hell!

My boredom banished, I noted the location and ran three miles to the nearest village to alert the authorities. Fate, it would seem, is not without a sense of humor.

HOURS LATER, I LED A CONSTABLE TO THE SPOT. HE STRUNG YELLOW TAPE around the area and called a detective. Having successfully discharged my civic duty and deepened my depression, I trudged to the village inn for pints of amber consolation.

A SEA OF STRANGERS AND THE SMELL OF OLD HEARTH FIRES FILLED THE room.

“Fionnlagh, ya bastart!” my best friend Max shouted over the din in his Scottish brogue.

I slumped next to him at the worn wooden bar.

“Why the long face?” he asked.

“It’s the same tired tale. I hate cleanin’ up after sloppy tourists and remindin’ selfish people of the rules. The job description never mentioned bein’ unappreciated, underpaid, and lonely. I want to leave, but somethin’s holdin’ me here. And I don’t know what else I’m suited to do. To make matters worse, today I found a dead person in the woods! Heart attack’s my guess.” I rested my head in my hands.

“Damn,” said Max. “Still, that’s one person you’re havin’ a better day than.”

Always the optimist. “Why’s it so crowded?” I asked.

“A movie crew’s set up shop. They’re filmin’ *The Kelpie of Loch Ness*.”

“But Loch Ness is miles east of here. And kelpies live in streams, not lochs.” I shook my head. “I guess the script writer didn’t care about geographic and mythological accuracy. And no doubt they’ll muck up the forest—tramplin’ the twayblade, leavin’ trash about, and frightenin’ the crested tits.”

“Did you say tits?”

“Crested tits are a kind of bird, my oversexed friend.”

“How’s it even possible to be oversexed?” he asked.

Always the hedonist. “It must’ve cost them a pretty penny to get permission to film in the park. Ah, the magic of money. I want some of that magic, too—a better payin’ job where people appreciate my efforts.” But what job would that be?

“Speakin’ of money,” said Max. “I landed a job drivin’ the movie stars to and from the village, includin’ the male lead Severino Raum. And I’ve met Lily Boucher and Dierdre O’Sullivan!”

I whistled. “Those are bonnie actresses. You must be in wanker heaven,” I teased.

“Mock all you want, but we’ve chatted. I’m workin’ my charms on Ms. Boucher.”

“And already on a last name basis with her, I see. Impressive. And Ms. O’Sullivan?” I asked, emphasizing the “Ms.”

Max shrugged. “Well, it seems I’m not her type.”

“Ah, so she’s a woman of discriminatin’ taste. I fancy her already,” I said, raising my glass.

“Jealousy doesn’t suit a handsome fellow such as yourself,” Max replied with a grin. “On a more serious note, the movie location scout went missin’ yesterday.”

Missing? Could it… “Was he tall and thin with long blond hair?”

“How’d you know?” Max asked, raising his eyebrows. Then he connected the dots. “Damn. That explains why they bumbled about the woods today. The line producer’s ragin’. Equipment got damaged and they fell behind schedule.”

“So, they need a forest guide…” *One man’s misfortune is another’s opportunity. Maybe this is the change I need.*.. It would be nice to enjoy the finer things in life in the company of new friends. “Would you introduce me to the person in charge? I can be there after my rounds at three o’clock tomorrow afternoon.”

“Aye. They’re set up in the clearin’ along the southern base of Horseshoe Hill.”

“Many thanks, Max.” I walked to my modest cabin under the waxing gibbous moon. That night I dreamed, as I often did, of swimming in a forest stream.

THE NEXT DAY, I HUSTLED THROUGH MY PATROLS AND SKIPPED LUNCH TO finish early. A brisk walk brought me to Horseshoe Hill. People, trailers, and movie-making equipment packed the clearing.

"Fionnlagh!" Max waved. Crew rushed around like bees in a hive. We passed two long tables heaped with tempting unhealthy snacks and drinks, the likes of which I'd never before beheld.

My eyes widened. My stomach grumbled, reminding me I'd skipped lunch.

Max nodded. "That's craft service. Food and drink for the cast."

"And crew?"

"Aye. Another benefit of workin' here. And don't think I haven't been eatin' my fair share."

"I never doubted it." I could get used to this. "How can they afford to pay your wage and feed you?" I teased, tilting my head toward the buffet.

Then I saw her. Lily Boucher—willowy but with curves exactly where they should be, waist-length flaxen hair, unblemished pale skin, and icy blue eyes. "Wow," I whispered.

"Aye. You might want to close yer gob."

I took his advice. "Can you introduce me?"

"I'm afraid not. We've been told to only speak to the actors when spoken to."

Lily turned her head and graced me with a subtle, yet somehow intimate, smile before resuming her conversation with the director.

"Hello? Earth to Fionnlagh," said Max.

"Oh, um, sorry."

Max slapped me on the back knowingly. "Aye, she has that effect on most men and a few of the women. Come on. I'll introduce you to the line producer." He led me to a short bald man wearing glasses and a scowl.

"Mr. Stantz," Max said. "Fionnlagh here is the local park ranger. He knows these hills like the back of his hand."

Stantz's facial expression improved. "Is that so?" A limp handshake. "We've lost our location scout. Without a competent guide, I estimate we'll overshoot our schedule by six percent and our budget by eight percent. Want a job?"

He summarized the duties, wages, and benefits.

I nodded a lot. Did I want to stop being a ranger? Let's see… Better pay, better food, lovely company, and I still could enjoy the park. "When would you like me to start, Mr. Stantz?"

"Be here at seven a.m. tomorrow."

I strolled home. On the way, I called my supervisor regarding a long overdue leave of absence.

THE NEXT MORNING, ENERGIZED BY MY DECISION, I HIKED TO THE BASE OF Horseshoe Hill.

Stantz conversed with Dierdre O'Sullivan. He turned to me. "Ah, Fionnlagh. Go see Jennifer in trailer B to sign your paperwork. Then see Mark in trailer C to review our planned shooting locations. By lunchtime, I'd like your advice on how to most easily access each site. I don't need any more damaged equipment." He walked off.

Dierdre stood nearly as tall as me, with a warm athletic appeal starkly different than Lily's cold remote beauty. I drank in in her luminous green eyes, freckle-dusted cheeks, and wild red hair. She smelled like the forest rather than perfume or hairspray.

"Fionnlagh. That means fair warrior."

"Yes, Ms. O'Sullivan."

"Please, call me Dierdre."

"As you wish."

"Are there game in these woods, Fionnlagh?"

“Black grouse, sheep, and deer. But huntin’s illegal.”

“I see. And predators?”

“Osprey and golden eagle. Otters. Scottish wildcat. Nothin’ that would harm you.”

“I appreciate your concern.” Her eyes twinkled. “Any wolves?”

“Sadly, no longer.” I shook my head. “I’ve argued for years to rewild the woods with wolves. It would reduce the deer and sheep populations and help restore native flora and fauna.” *Ugh! I’m boring her to tears.*

Still, Dierdre flashed a stunning smile with perfect white teeth. “A pleasure to meet you, Fionnlagh.” She strode to her trailer.

I hated to see her leave but loved watching her go. Time for some paperwork. Sigh. I exited trailer B thirty minutes later with a sore writing hand. I squinted in the bright sun and crossed to the adjacent trailer C. Over the next couple of hours, I modified the planned routes marked on maps.

I marched to the center of camp in search of Stantz. I caught the scent of bacon. Its siren’s aroma beckoned. I was feeling a tad peckish. I tracked the scent to the craft service table. “Imagine my surprise at finding you here, Max.”

“Well, this body didn’t happen by accident,” Max replied, patting his ample belly. He loaded what appeared to be a second helping onto his plate.

Not to be outdone, I shouldered Max aside and loaded my plate with slices of roast mutton, a BLT, and a fried chicken breast. I attacked the mutton.

“My, my. Someone has a taste for meat,” said Dierdre. Her eyes twinkled with amusement.

With a full mouth, all I could do was grin sheepishly.

She flashed that smile again and strode off before I finished chewing.

“Smooth,” said Max.

He was right. But I didn’t let that stop me from polishing off my well-earned snack. I found Stantz gesturing energetically and dispensing orders to a queue of crew members. I waited my turn.

“Ah, Fionnlagh. What do you have for me?”

“I reviewed the shootin’ locations and changed the routes to use existin’ trails and follow less steep slopes. That will ease movement through the trees and avoid harmin’ the woods.”

“I’m more concerned about not harming our equipment.”

Of course, you are. “Then I recommend we don’t cross the streams. That’s just askin’ for someone to slip and dunk the equipment.”

“Very good. Be here at six a.m. to guide the team to tomorrow’s shoot.” He nodded. I was dismissed.

I snatched a red towel from the costume department and headed off to scout tomorrow’s planned routes. Periodically, I tore a thin strip of material and tied it to a tree branch to mark the way. This would make it easy for the crew and cast to follow. A gentle breeze carried the faint scent of wintergreen. I marked another tree. I picked up crumpled papers and soda cans along the trail. The papers were still crisp, the cans without rust. Must be recent trash from the crew. I sighed.

A grouse gave a cackling cry of alarm and burst from the undergrowth, wings beating furiously. Dierdre stood two meters behind me. She wore hiking boots and black spandex shorts that showed off her tanned muscular legs.

My heart raced. *Must be from being startled*, I lied to myself. “Umm. Hello,” I said. Smooth.

“Hi,” she replied cheerily. “We meet again. What are you doing?”

“Markin’ the route to tomorrow’s shootin’ location.”

“Ah, so no one gets lost. That makes sense. And the trash?”

“Pickin’ up after the litterbugs,” I replied, hefting my pack. “Someone’s got to keep the woods clean.”

She flashed me that dazzling smile. “You really care about the park. That’s refreshing.”

“What brings you out?” I asked.

“I like to hike. Do you want some company?”

Is the Pope Catholic? “Sure. I’m headed that way,” I said, pointing. I marched uphill at a brisk pace. Dierdre matched my stride without difficulty. Periodically, I stopped to mark more trees. The red towel shrunk while the collection of refuse in my backpack grew.

“What are those?” asked Dierdre, pointing at thin green stems adorned with white bell-shaped sunward-facing flowers.

She seemed genuinely interested. “Those are creeping lady’s tresses. It is an orchid that lives in symbiosis with a fungus on its rootstalks.”

Dierdre’s nodded. “Pretty AND smart.”

I knew she was just trying to make me blush. But since it worked, I hurried along the path. *Say something, you fool!* "Umm, not half as pretty as you." *Ugh, perhaps it's better if I don't speak at all.*

Thankfully, she changed the subject. "Was that bird I startled earlier a black grouse?"

Clever girl. "Aye." With Dierdre's distracting company, the trail-marking passed quickly. I walked her to camp. "See you tomorrow."

THE NEXT MORNING, THE TEAM ASSEMBLED. THE CREW FAWNED ON LILY like slaves around an empress. She distributed seductive smiles and gratuitously long shoulder touches.

She lived to be the center of attention. Everyone was just a toy to her.

Severino surveyed the group with crossed arms. Wardrobe had issued him a jaunty fedora, no doubt to highlight his classic chiseled features. He wore dark sunglasses, trousers, and a long-sleeved shirt. He strutted about with utter self-confidence and had a tendency to stand just inside others' personal space.

Stantz gave the word. I led the crew toward today's shoot, pointing out the red strips marking the trail. Although the path was too narrow for vehicles, I had picked routes smooth enough for equipment to be rolled on dollies rather than hand carried as before.

More than one crew member expressed their gratitude for that. It felt good to be appreciated. Even Severino thanked me for guiding us so that he

didn’t have to get his wingtips wet in a stream. Fancy shoes or not, the guy was in good shape. He didn’t get winded like most of the others.

The day’s shoot went smoothly. Back at base camp, Stantz tallied people and machines. No missing people. No damaged equipment. “Nicely done, Fionnlagh,” he said. “If you keep this up, we’ll consider you for a permanent position.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, inclining my head.

I turned to leave. Dierdre stood right behind me. I flinched.

“What’s this? A ranger caught off his guard?” she asked, eyes sparkling.

“Perhaps,” I replied. “But you’re always a welcome surprise.” *Not bad.*

She gave me that glorious smile.

THE NEXT COUPLE OF DAYS WENT SIMILARLY WELL. NO ONE WANDERED OFF and no equipment got broken. I grew closer to the crew. My practice of picking up trash on the return trips finally got through to them. Today, there was nothing for me to collect.

Despite these positive developments, doubts about what I should be doing with my life still nagged me.

My doubts fled when Dierdre caught up and hiked next to me. We soaked in the beauty of the ancient forest, which always made me feel like I’d entered a mythical world. And it was nice to find someone else who savored the forest smells and its denizens’ chorus. Lily continued her shameless flirting with anyone with a Y chromosome.

When we returned to camp, a good day suddenly got even better.

"Would you like to join me for dinner in the village?" Dierdre asked.

Yes! Yes, I bloody well would! "That sounds great," I replied with all the calm I could muster. "The Broken Crock serves up a tasty venison."

Between Dierdre's charms, the venison (well done for me, rare for her), and the red wine, dinner passed like a pleasant dream.

Afterward, I walked her to her room at the inn. I ached to kiss her good night but did not want to risk spoiling the night's magic. "Tonight was nice." Understatement of the month.

"I had a good time, too. Good night."

On my way home, I noticed Severino leaving a tavern with a pretty young gaffer from the crew. Good for them.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, THE GAFFER DIDN'T SHOW UP FOR WORK. NOR DID SHE show up the next day. The crew buzzed about this second disappearance. After work, I bought Max a pint at the tavern.

"What do you make of the missing gaffer?" I asked.

"I haven't a clue."

"Well, two nights ago, I saw Severino leavin' the tavern with her."

Max set down his mug. "Surely you don't suspect foul play?"

"It is quite a coincidence…"

"Maybe so," Max replied. "But you'd be daft to bring this up to Stantz or the police without proof. First, she could be just fine. Second, it'd be a

movie star’s word against yours. That’d be the end of your wee film career.”

“Your point’s well taken, but I’m gonna keep my eyes on Severino,” I replied.

“Very well. Now, if I may change the subject, I’ve got a bit of quality news.”

I tilted my head and raised an eyebrow.

“Today, the last person I dropped off in the village was Ms. Boucher.”

“Still on a last name basis, I see.”

“Ha! Tease all you like, chief. She kissed me—on the lips!”

“Good for you.” I gave him a polite bow. “But you know she flirts with everyone, right? She’s a heartbreaker. Perilous.”

“I don’t mind a little bit of peril.”

I sighed. He wasn’t thinking, at least not with his head.

THE NEXT DAY, HORRIFIC NEWS REACHED THE CREW. TOURISTS FOUND THE missing gaffer in the woods, her body torn to bits by wild animals, though no blood was found at the site. Grief and fear descended on the crew. Stantz insisted we work, even though no one’s heart was in it.

Two dead people in one week? Fear joined my doubts about working in the film industry. During the day’s shoot, I took an occasional head count to ensure we hadn’t lost anyone. Whenever we stopped, I made sure to

surreptitiously observe Severino. But he did nothing to further arouse my suspicions. We safely returned to camp at the end of the day.

A driver collected some of the cast and shuttled them to the village. Shortly after he departed, Dierdre and Severino emerged from trailer A, talking about their scene together.

I milled about the food table, casting an occasional glance their way. They looked like they were waiting for a ride to town. Where's Max? The sun hadn't yet set, but the full moon peeked over the horizon. I approached them.

"Hi, Fionnlagh," said Dierdre.

"Hello, Ms. O'Sullivan," I replied formally in Severino's presence. "May I have a brief word?" gesturing with an arm.

Out of Severino's earshot, I said, "I don't see Max or Lily. If she's toyin' with him and makes him too late, Mr. Stantz will fire him. I'll check the nearby woods. Would you please keep Severino from throwin' a tantrum about his ride being late?"

"Certainly," she replied. "You're a good friend."

I ran up the trail. There was no way I could track Max's footprints mingled among all the others on the trail. But I knew of a small clearing far enough from camp to not be overheard yet within easy hiking distance. I headed that way.

Faint grunting reached my ears. I slowed my pace, picking my steps carefully to avoid making noise. I needed to confirm whether this was Max —no point in interrupting the wrong couple caught in flagrante delicto al fresco. Screening myself behind trees, I crept closer.

I reached the edge of the clearing and peered past a tree trunk. A naked woman straddled a man lying on his back in a bed of fallen rowan leaves. Lily's unmistakable blond hair bounced in time with her grunting and Max's groaning. Shit! He'd hate me if I interrupted. But he'd lose his job if I did nothing. Still, he might feel this was worth losing his job over.

As I considered my options and duties as a friend, Lily's grunting deepened and took on the fevered pitch of an enraged silverback gorilla. Max's moans shifted to cries of agony.

Christ!

Lily arched her back and gave a final roar. Silence descended on the clearing. Lily stood.

Okay, their fun was done. Now he'd better get back to camp. Averting my gaze so as to minimize any embarrassment, I called, "Sorry to intrude, but Max is needed at camp to drive the cast back to town."

"Fionnlagh." It was only a whisper, but an octave lower than Lily's normal voice. It conveyed immense power. "Fionnlagh. You can look at me. You want to look, don't you?"

I wanted to preserve Max's dignity. I tried to lock my eyes on Lily's feet. But slowly and uncontrollably, my gaze slid upward, rapturously taking in the alluring curves and flawless skin. My mind felt thick, like I was drunk.

"Fionnlagh."

I ripped my eyes from her perfect breasts and looked Lily in the eyes—completely black eyes, the dead eyes of a shark.

"Fionnlagh. Come to me."

My mind screamed no, but those three words set my loins on fire. I soon stood before her.

Lily gently traced a clawed finger down the side of my face. I shivered in simultaneous arousal and terror staring at the empty pits of her eyes.

"Disrobe," she whispered, her lips brushing my ear. All other thoughts fled my mind.

A furry blur smashed Lily and me to the ground. Demonic howling and the ferocious snarling of a wolf rent the silence.

Get the hell out of here! my mind screamed. But my body would not comply. I felt immersed in molasses, staring up at the full moon. Finally, I managed to lift my head.

The snarling increased in intensity. The enormous reddish-brown wolf pounced. Its maw clamped like a bear trap on Lily's neck. Seemingly immune to pain, Lily hissed and clawed. The wolf shook its powerful jaws violently from side to side, waving Lily like a rag doll until it tore off her head. Viscous black blood oozed from Lily's severed neck.

I fought the urge to vomit.

Silence descended on the clearing like a coffin lid. Lily's corpse dissolved into a dark, foul-smelling smoke and wafted away.

My jaw dropped. What the hell?

The wolf faced me. Its green eyes stared into mine.

My legs remained paralyzed. *That's it, game over.*

The wolf flexed its muscles like a weightlifter.

My vision blurred, or maybe it was the wolf. And then a naked Dierdre squatted in front of me. I blacked out.

I CAME TO LYING FLAT ON MY BACK. THE PEACEFUL NIGHT SKY FRAMED Dierdre's concerned face. Questions screamed in my head. "Max?" was the first I asked.

Dierdre said nothing. Her face fell.

Shit! Tears welled in my eyes, but I didn't yet have the luxury of time to grieve. "What the hell just happened?"

Dierdre took a big breath. "Lily was a succubus. They're demons that seduce and feed off the life energy of their victims. Max never had a chance."

Succubus? It was just too much. "Let me see him."

She helped me over to Max.

Dierdre must've clothed him while I was out. "Max…" A sob escaped me.

DIERDRE LED ME TOWARD THE NOW-DESERTED BASE CAMP.

I felt numb. How could this be real? “Succubus?”

“Do you doubt your own eyes? You were very lucky.”

“Lucky? What part of that shite-storm was lucky?”

“First, that I’m a werewolf strong enough to slay a succubus.”

Damn. I’d hoped that was just a shock-induced hallucination. But there was no joke in her eyes. Werewolf? Sure. Why not? In for a penny, in for a pound.

“Second, that while supernatural creatures cannot recognize others in human form, I had my suspicions about Lily. So, I followed you into the woods.” She read my face. “You have the look of a man who accepts what he hears because he is expecting to wake up.”

“It is a lot to absorb,” I replied. “Now, don’t think I’m not grateful, but why didn’t you eat me?”

“Werewolves have a choice. I only prey on animals. And I like you.”

Relieved that she meant “like” in the affectionate rather than epicurean sense, I remained too stunned to fully savor the compliment. *Max is gone!*

“Succubus? Werewolf?” I sat on the ground, overwhelmed, and shook my head. “So, what do we tell the police?” I asked eventually.

“Nothing. What could you accomplish except getting sent to an asylum? Lily’s will simply have to be another unexplained desertion. They’ll search tomorrow and find Max’s body. You can’t bring him back, and his killer’s been punished.”

Killer. “Does a succubus drain the blood from its victim and have the strength to rip a body apart?”

“No. Why?”

“Lily may have killed the location scout, but not the gaffer. That means there must be another killer.”

“What?”

I outlined my suspicions of Severino. “I have a bad feelin’ about this.”

“You can’t be certain, though.”

“No. But I must keep the park safe.”

Dierdre nodded and met my eyes. “And my secret? Is it also safe?”

“Aye. You saved my life. I owe you that and more. Plus, I fancy you, too.”

That smile!

We continued in silence. Despite, or perhaps because of, my shock, I felt a strengthening bond with the forest. The shallowness and transience of Hollywood was not what I needed, I realized. I was meant to protect the serenity of woods and streams.

Moonlight highlighted Dierdre’s hair. Unconsciously, I intertwined my fingers in hers. We held hands the rest of the way to town.

Dierdre helped me reach my cabin. She cleaned and bandaged my left arm. “Sorry. I scratched you when I attacked Lily.”

“I’ve had worse. But will…”

“Don’t worry,” Dierdre interrupted. “Our scratches don’t create new werewolves.”

Finally, some good news.

“And neither do our kisses.” She leaned in and gave me a long soft first kiss I’d never forget. “Get some rest, Fionnlagh,” Dierdre said as she left.

Am I going mad? Max! Succubus? Falling in love with a werewolf? Grief and confusion swirled in my mind. I vowed to keep watch on Severino. Sleep eluded me despite my injury and exhaustion.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, LILY'S ABSENCE CREATED QUITE A STIR. STANTZ cancelled the day's filming. He ordered the crew to search the woods and village for her.

Pointless though I knew it to be, I played my part in the charade. I assigned search areas to crew members, making sure to include the location that held Max's body. I asked everyone to return to camp at noon. They set off, cries of "Lily?" and "Max?" gradually fading in the distance.

No trace of Lily was found, of course. But when we reconvened at lunchtime, someone reported having found Max's body.

Stantz asked for the location and alerted the authorities. He gathered the writers to determine how to revise the script in order to complete the film using the existing footage of Lily. He told me to resume the search for Lily.

"Would you like some assistance?" asked Dierdre.

"Yes, indeed."

"I'll help, too," said Severino.

Why would he do that? Was Severino friends with Lily? If so, what would that imply? I hid my surprise and assigned them each separate search areas.

Dierdre went her way, Severino his.

I headed toward the bathroom trailer but kept my eye on Severino. Once he entered the woods, I reversed course and followed him at a distance, stepping silently. *If he tries anything, I can record video with my mobile phone.*

My pulse raced when it became apparent that Severino wasn't headed toward his assigned search area. He veered east and struck a hiking path. Occasionally, he'd raise his head with closed eyes, almost like a hound scenting the air.

That's weird. Luckily, I was downwind of him. I'd better stay that way.

After a few minutes, Severino encountered a searching crew member—Fiona, I think. He smiled and engaged in friendly conversation with her. The distance prevented me from overhearing them. But she smiled, nodded, and followed him off the trail.

What's he up to? I followed. After five minutes, their walking sounds ceased. I trod with caution, hugging the trees. There!

The two stood close in a flat grassy area, beyond which ran a forest stream. Severino gazed into Fiona's eyes. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her gently. She moaned with pleasure. His lips slid down to her neck.

Okay, I don't need to see this. He is just a lech more interested in shagging than finding a missing coworker.

The wind shifted, and Severino's nostrils flared. His head snapped toward me. He smiled.

That's when I saw the fangs. Christ! A fecking vampire!

Severino lowered the unconscious Fiona to the ground. He addressed me calmly. "Ah, Fionnlagh. So, you like to watch? That's naughty." He wagged his finger. His smile never reached his bloodshot eyes.

I wondered if I could outrun a vampire, but that seemed my best option.

I never found out. A reddish-brown werewolf burst from the bushes and leaped onto Severino's back. Dierdre! The vampire snarled. The werewolf snapped and slashed. Dierdre had the advantage of speed. Her fangs and claws scored multiple gashes across Severino's arms and legs. But Severino was stronger. And his wounds neither bled nor slowed him.

Dierdre! My mind raced. How could I help her? I inched toward the melee, grateful to be unworthy of the supernatural combatants' notice.

He kept trying to grab her in a bear hug. Dierdre gambled with an open-jawed lunge at the vampire's throat. He twisted aside at the last moment and got his arms around her torso. Dierdre howled and scrambled with all four legs, but to no avail.

If he could pull apart a woman's body, could he also crush a werewolf?

Severino squeezed. She howled again.

Dierdre! I snatched a fallen tree limb four inches thick and the length of a claymore. I leaped and swung with all my might. The branch cracked audibly on the back of Severino's head, leaving me with a meter-long shard.

Without releasing his grip on Dierdre, Severino spun and snarled at me.

Shit! I jammed the jagged branch into his side.

He ignored the thrust and lashed out with a vicious kick to my ribs.

I flew backward, crashing in the shallow stream. My left side throbbed with pain, and I labored to breathe. Cracked ribs, probably. But at least he couldn't attack me again without releasing Dierdre.

As I caught my breath, my skin tingled with warmth under the flowing water. The pain in my ribs dulled. My body seemed to stretch. What was happening? My fingers fused into hooves! *What the…* My arms lengthened. Fine black hair sprouted everywhere. I stood on four legs and whipped my long tail. *I'm a…horse?* Another pained howl interrupted my confusion. *Dierdre! Do something!*

I charged Severino. I chomped down on his right shoulder with my sturdy incisors. I braced my four legs and yanked backward. Dierdre fell free of his grasp and collapsed.

Severino roared and swiped at me. I dodged, reared, and punched the vampire in the face with a foreleg. That hoof strike would have caved in a car bumper. All it did was piss him off. He gathered himself and snarled. "Kelpie! Sealed with a curse as sharp as a knife. Doomed is your soul and damned is your life!"

Kelpie? But I had no time to ponder.

Severino swiped at me. I kicked again. He dodged, slipping past my right foreleg. He lunged and wrapped his arms around my upper chest. "Kelpie or not, you still need to breathe." He squeezed.

Do something! I twisted and clamped my jaws around his neck with the strength of a vise. Had he been a man, I could have bitten clean through. But he was no man.

Severino just laughed, the sound hauntingly altered by his compressed throat. "Vampires don't breathe, idiot," he croaked. He squeezed my chest so hard I couldn't exhale.

I felt my rib cage slowly collapsing. I needed air! My pulse pounded in my head, louder than the stream. The stream… A distant memory or

perhaps a primordial instinct told me that running water would aid me.

My vision tunneled. *I don't have much time! If I don't stop him, he'll kill me and Dierdre.* I dragged the struggling vampire toward the stream.

When Severino recognized my intent, his eyes went wide. He twisted to raise his legs.

Barely conscious, I staggered two more backward steps and collapsed sideways into the stream with Severino beneath me.

He writhed in the churning water and let go of me. He flailed to break free of my maw. His submerged skin bubbled. He redoubled his efforts, pummeling me with crushing hammer blows that would have shattered concrete.

But the stream granted me strength and dulled the pain. And released from his crushing grip, I could breathe, despite my muzzle being underwater. My jaws remained clamped on his neck. *You screwed with the wrong goddamned ranger.*

Eventually, the running water took its lethal supernatural toll on the vampire. His attacks weakened, converting into random flailing. His body slackened. I released my bite as he melted into tar-black sludge. The stream washed away his remains, like tears in the rain. The water's power coursed through me. I felt strong and at home. Home! I stood.

"Fionnlagh! You did it!" cried Dierdre in her human form.

Unable to speak, I tilted my kelpie head to convey an obvious question.

Dierdre understood. "To alter your form, flex your muscles as hard as you can."

I nodded. The change swept through my body. I stood in waist-deep water, back in my human form—unclothed, so there I stayed. "Um, I have more questions."

Dierdre laughed. "Fine. But first, thanks for saving me. Attacking a vampire as a human was valiant but foolish."

"How could I not?" I bowed. "Although I might've hesitated if I knew vampires tasted like arse."

Dierdre laughed again.

I liked the sound of that. "Are you all right? And Fiona?"

"I'm fine. I heal very quickly in my wolf form. The trance he put on Fiona will wear off in an hour or so. She'll have no memory of how she got here."

“Second question: what the feck?” I asked, gesturing at myself.

“I have a theory. You must be of kelpie blood. That would explain why you’re so closely attuned to nature. My werewolf scratch energized your potential and the power of the stream loosed it. None too soon, I’d say.”

So, I was a kelpie! Not exactly the change I’d planned. I returned to the moment. “Not that I’m complainin’, but you’re naked.”

“So are you. Maybe we should do something about that. Together.”

Who was I to argue with the lady?

FILMING OF *THE KELPIE OF LOCH NESS* SHUT DOWN. I FINALLY UNDERSTOOD the magic of Scottish woods and my place therein. I returned to my beloved park, both the same and changed forever. I wandered uphill along a sun-dappled hiking path from Loch Beinn a’ Mheadhoin. The way diverged and I—I took the one less traveled by, with Dierdre at my side, and that has made all the difference.

THE HOUSE ON THE HILL

R.E. SARGENT

Prologue

HIS HEART BEAT LOUDLY AS he traversed the hilly terrain. The sound of a twig snapping brought his full attention back to his actions. He slipped behind the closest foliage in case he had attracted unwanted attention. Although the fog had started to settle in, he still had a clear view of the house on the hill. The lights were on and the blinds were wide open. Occasionally, he would see a shape pass behind the glass—obviously someone going about their nightly routine, living their life. Anger rose up through his veins. He felt his muscles tighten and he could almost hear them as they stretched to their limits.

The image of the house on the hill blurred as he reached desperately inside himself, clawing at distant memories, wondering why he was the way he was. The pain in his soul was fresh, raw. He knew he had been through

something, but he couldn’t discern what. It was as if a fog had penetrated his skull and wrapped around his brain. It wasn’t simply that he didn’t understand *why* he was this way. It wasn’t even because he didn’t remember what his name was. His main confusion stemmed from the fact that he didn’t know *what* he was.

If I have a name, I must be human. But I don’t look human. I don’t feel human. But I can think. I can feel.

He reached down and picked up a boulder the size of his meaty fist.

I know this is a stone. How else would I know that?

“Stone,” he whispered. “I shall go by Stone.”

Stone watched as the lights winked off in the house for the evening—its lone occupant most likely turning in for the night—took one last look at the house and staggered down the makeshift trail toward the bottom of the hill. He then trekked for miles until he happened upon a grove of trees he decided he’d slumber in—the first place he felt safe since he had found himself in this existence hours earlier. He collected a few boughs of branches and handfuls of leaves and put together a sort of bed to rest on. Not that he was tired. He had too many wispy and fleeting thoughts wafting through his brain that conflicted with each other.

The mystery wasn’t only who or what he was. He had to find out who lived in the house on the hill. Why had he become so enraged when he gazed upon it?

Stone took a moment to examine himself for the first time. He held his hands out in front of him. He decided they weren’t hands after all. More like hand-paws. Was he a dog? Impossible. He had walked upright. He stretched his hand-paws to see how wide the pads would expand. Razor-sharp claws popped out, catching him off guard.

Holy shit! Not paws, claws.

Stone worked the muscles again, and the claws suddenly popped back out of sight. Stunned, he sat there and looked at the details of the meaty mitts. Then it dawned on him. He could see every detail plainly, even though no light from the atmosphere made its way through the copse of trees. He had extraordinary vision.

How he wished he had a mirror.

Mirror. I know what a mirror is. I have intelligence. I must be a man… but how? How did I become…this?

He felt his face and although the pads on his hand-paws gave a completely different sensation than he remembered feeling with fingers—which meant he had to have been in a human's body before—he could feel a full beard. Possibly even an entirely furry face. His ears were sharp and pointy, and it felt like the cartilage had been replaced with stiff cardboard. He felt for his mouth.

Is that a fucking snout?

His teeth were long and felt sharp to his touch. It was then he noticed the thick fur on his arms and legs. He was naked, and he had the uncanny feeling that he should be uncomfortable being so, yet it felt natural. Upon inspection, his genitalia did not appear human to him and he didn't recognize it, but he felt a swell of pride at the sight.

Stone concentrated on the vaporous thoughts and snippets of knowledge as they floated through his mind, trying to latch on to something that might explain what was going on. He was aware that he existed, but he was not aware of existing before this night. His fragmented memory told him that he must have lived in another time as another being, but his mind felt like a puzzle someone dumped back into the box the moment more than two pieces were connected together.

He tried to focus on what little he could retain. He had become aware for the first time earlier tonight at the base of the hill. And he had inexplicably been pulled toward the house. He did not understand it, but he had little control over his mind and body as he traversed the hillside to get a closer look at the outside—at the movement behind the glass.

Before he realized it was happening, Stone's heart started beating at hyper-rate. Thoughts of blood and body parts surged through his brain as images of carnage flashed behind his eyes. He felt aroused and then ashamed, for he did not understand what was happening to him. As he tried to sort through new, overwhelming emotions, new feelings and new thoughts, only one emotion floated to the top when he thought about the house on the hill. Rage. Stone animalistically knew why he was here…even if he didn't *understand* why. The bloodlust.

Chapter One

WOODY MCGREGOR SAT NEAR THE FRONT DECK OF HIS RUSTIC HOME smoking a Marlboro, watching the sparks pop from the firepit and disappear in the chilly night air. He took a swig off his Miller and pushed back in one of the Adirondack wooden rocking chairs he had purchased when he had bought the place, which was so far out, it was almost off the grid. If it wasn't for satellite wi-fi, he'd have no connection to the world at all.

God knows why I bought two. I've never had company. Ever. He eyed the second chair.

The sky was void of any moon and the house lights were extinguished. The only light came from the thirty-six-inch steel fire pit that sat on the stone sitting area which looked out over the valley and away from the simple 1,080 square foot single-wide mobile home he called his castle ever since his old life ended.

The view of the valley was majestic—during the nighttime with the lights from the small town below and during the day just from the sheer beauty of the landscape—which was one of the reasons he had purchased the place. The other was the lack of people. He had absolutely no other neighbors around him. The rough and rutted dirt road that served his property at the top of the mountain stretched for a couple miles from the main road at the bottom of the hill with no other dwellings along the path. People truly had no reason to be up in his space, and accordingly, he installed a gate at the bottom of the hill and kept it chained shut unless he was driving through it.

Taking another chug of his beer, Woody ran his hand through his thick, graying, beard and thought back on what put him here less than a year ago. The break, which caused him to lose any remaining faith he had left in human beings and the world.

He hardly recognized the man he used to be. The corporate man that wore the suit to work every day. The man that showed up before everyone else and even took calls on the weekend. The man that spent twenty-five years of his life working for the same corporation, moving his way up from an entry-level position to one of the company's highest-ranking managers. With only two people above him, he felt accomplished, like his hard work was finally paying off.

What happened, happened overnight. Woody was well respected, and his professional career was at its peak, even though his direct boss, Ron,

was a total prick. What he didn't realize at the time was that the prick—the one he put up with every day, because he knew that in the corporate world, you always had to deal with at least one asshole to make it—felt threatened for his own job by Woody. Woody didn't realize that being smart, achieving the results that he was asked to, and being liked by everyone would be the end of him.

Out of the blue, two hours after arriving to work on a random day, he found himself before a committee and bullshit wild accusations, and within two days, Woody was gone. Unemployed. Stripped of his reputation, his stock options, and his life. Escorted out of the building by security like some criminal.

Downing the rest of his beer, Woody straightened his worn ball cap, scooted himself up off the chair, and went into the house, flicking on the interior light. He heard a movement behind him and turned to watch as Dexter, his ninety-pound German Shepherd, got up off the ground to join him.

"It's okay, Dex…you can stay there. I'm just getting another beer."

Dexter stopped and looked at him, then proceeded to follow Woody into the house and over to his water bowl, where he lapped up the cold liquid, the stray droplets splattering the ground around him.

"What's the matter with your water bowl outside? Did it get dirt in it or something?"

Woody smiled slightly and rolled his eyes, knowing the water bowl outside was fine. Dexter just wanted to be where Woody was, and that was the way it was. Woody used the bathroom and grabbed another beer, heading back out to his favorite chair, which he had added especially comfortable cushions to. Dexter laid down on his dog bed beside Woody with a content "hmmph."

Woody reached down and scratched Dex behind the ears, smiling. Dexter was the only "person" he truly loved any longer.

When Woody had arrived home from work that day, in the middle of the day—to his wife's astonishment—she was the rock he needed. While she tried to push him out of his depression, to keep him moving forward, he had a hard time doing so. The injustice he felt was unreal. He felt betrayed. Tossed away like yesterday's newspaper. He applied for hundreds of jobs.

Went on numerous interviews. He knew that if he heard the word “overqualified” one more time, he was going to lose it.

When the money from savings dried up, he desperately tried to figure out how to make ends meet as his wife’s meager minimum-wage job barely paid for food and utilities. Then one March day, his world came to an end. As he left his wife, Marcy, to sleep in while he went out to buy some flowers and pick up some breakfast to celebrate her forty-fourth birthday, he came home to find her still on the bed, deceased. She had never woken up, and the coroner had ruled it as a heart attack.

Woody knew that the stress of their situation had been the end of her. The woman that had been there for him most of his life—and the only actual person remaining in his life since his parents were deceased and his friends and coworkers dropped him like a bad habit—was gone. Just like that.

That was when the break happened. When he slipped into darkness. It wasn’t until two days later that he realized he was laying in his own waste beside her, the cold coffee and the stale breakfast laying on her nightstand.

When they had finally taken her, he fell into a deep fog, night turning into day and day into night. He mostly got up to use the bathroom or forage for any remaining food that had been left in the sparse cabinets. It wasn’t until the day the electricity went out that he crawled up out of the pit he was living in and assessed his surroundings.

Why hadn’t he noticed before that he smelled like shit? When was the last time he had taken a shower? His sweats and t-shirt were stained with things of various colors. He reached down and scraped a dried ramen noodle off his shirt. In the bathroom, he reached for the light switch and flicked it, only to remember the power was off. When was the last time he had paid a bill? Thirty days? Sixty? More?

Reaching for the shower valve, he turned it and was surprised to find water coming out of the showerhead. He decided to take advantage of it while he still had the chance, opened the frosted window enough to shed some light into the room—and stepped into the tile cubicle. He was surprised the water was still hot since they had an electric water heater, but he knew as soon as it cooled off, that was the end of that luxury. As he reached for his soap, he noticed all the stray hair and scum that clung to the surfaces of the entire stall, and he wrinkled up his nose in disgust.

After, he dried off on his mildew-smelling towel, found some clean clothes in the back of the closet and pulled them on, and went and checked the mailbox, which was stuffed full. As he made his way back to the house, he flipped through the envelopes. All bills and junk. And a five-dollar rebate check. Dinner. As he approached the house, it was the two notices taped to the door that caught his attention. They were exactly what he thought they were. Foreclosure notices. He had sixteen days left before his house was gone…the house, and any equity he had in it.

Woody looked back over the twinkle of lights and at his life now. The beer was cold and satisfying. The air danced in his lungs as if it hadn't ever touched another human before. This place was his. A place that the bank didn't have any claim to. Privacy. And the best companion in Dexter he could ever imagine. He would never go back to the corporate world—he got anxious even thinking about it. This was his life now.

When he read that final foreclosure notice, he knew he had to act fast. Calling a real estate investor that had posted a yellow sign at one of the intersections of town claiming to buy homes for cash, he was able to squeak the sale out before the greedy bank grabbed the only thing he had left. Before it closed, he sold all the furniture, packed the things he wanted to keep in twenty-two boxes, and moved everything remaining to storage. With his equity in the bank, which was way more than he thought it would be, he lived in the cheapest motel he could find while he searched. A search that lasted sixty-seven days, and then he found this place.

Although under no obligation to do so, the real estate agent that had listed the property provided the history of the house, taking it to the point of too much information. The house had sat vacant for over a year and a half after the elderly man that lived there was found dead—they estimated for months before they found him. He was found in the yard, his bones picked clean by who-knew-what. While they couldn't find any evidence of foul play, they couldn't attribute his death to natural causes, either, so his death was listed as "unknown." With no heirs and no will, the estate was escheated to the state and finally sold.

That was the start of his new life. An online-only job providing chat support for some random online company. An electric, internet, tax and insurance bill only. An older Chevy 4x4 that was paid off. He adopted

Dexter a month after he got the place, and they had been living their life of simplicity ever since.

Although life was simple, for Woody, there was no joy. Not after the curveball life had thrown at him. While Dexter provided some comfort and companionship, it wasn't enough to scrape away at the formation of stone that surrounded Woody's heart. He would be two more beers in before he went inside to get ready for bed, although it was still early by most people's standards. As was his habit, he turned out the lights and slipped into bed, knowing that sleep would overtake him almost instantaneously.

Chapter Two

THE PAIN INSIDE STONE'S HEAD WAS TOO MUCH TO MANAGE, AND HE curled up in a ball, his paws over his face, his body burrowed into the tree branches. A low whine emitted from his muzzle, which he hoped no other creature of the night could hear.

He tried to understand his predicament. How had he become trapped in a body that wasn't his? He tried to understand his mission. If there was a reason for this—this hellish transformation into some kind of abomination that only movies and folklore supported—what was it? Was he destined to ravage the hillside, desecrating rabbits and any other varmints he could find? Cattle? Horses? Maybe even people?

He concentrated, tried to picture yesterday. What had he done all day? Was he in this body or another? No answers came to him, and images of the house on the hill filled his mind once more.

Is that my purpose? Something to do with that fucking house?

He tried to picture it on the inside. Had he ever been in it? Who lived there? Did he know them?

Feeling his right hind leg bouncing, Stone tore out of his hiding spot, scrambled the miles to the base of the hill and crisscrossed halfway up before slowing down to a crawl, careful not to give away his presence. He felt clumsy in his newfound body. Breathing out through his nose quietly, he concentrated on being stealthier. The scents of the night assaulted his

sense of smell—which he had not noticed before. Dampness. Pine. A nearby animal.

Stone stopped and tried to determine the source and direction of the scent. He concentrated on it, trying to channel his anxiety and discourse toward the critter. The animal must become his new focus. The power to focus would be his. The power to choose belonged to him. The animal must die. The draw of the house pulled his attention away from the scent of the unsuspecting meal, and without him even realizing it, Stone had abandoned the scent of the animal and was creeping closer toward the house on the hill.

He paused at the edge of the yard, sniffed the vehicle beside it, then the grass, and took one step onto the property. The lights in the windows were dark, and although Stone felt like he should be worried that they would all be illuminated at the same time and he would be caught prowling, he chuckled internally.

I think they would be the ones that were scared shitless, not me.

He approached the front window, slinking up underneath it, peering through with eyes that he only imagined looked evil as hell. He could make out the outline of furniture: a couch, a coffee table, a recliner.

Furniture. I know what it is. I've sat in a chair before. On a couch.

There was no movement in the house. Stone made his way to the next window. A dining room. Beyond it, a kitchen. He continued around the side to the back. More windows. All dark. All covered by blinds that were turned down tight. He could not see inside. He turned to his other newfound senses. He listened intently but only heard the whirring of a motor. Maybe a heater? He concentrated on the scent permeating from the home.

A man.

He smelled something else.

There's a dog in there!

Stone felt his hair stand up on his back—a new sensation for him. His lip involuntarily pulled back and his teeth bared. An urge took over him, and he commanded all his control to keep from ripping a hole through the side of the building. He clamped down hard on the avalanche of lust, wanting badly to understand, subconsciously knowing that whoever was in there was just like him—well, like he used to be. He could not lose control. He was not a killer.

Knowing that the smallest noise would send the dog into a frenzy, he crept away from the home, surprised at his new-found stealth. When he was out of earshot, he cut a wide berth around the home and found his way back down the hill.

As he made his way back to his lair, he tried to dissect his fascination with the house and the occupant inside. He tried to understand his urges. He grappled with the strange turn of events that put him in a body built for murder, with no instruction manual.

Back home on his pile of branches, he curled up once again, exhausted. Unable to unravel the threads of his mind, he let the darkness of the shadows overtake him and fell into a deep slumber.

Chapter Three

WOODY OPENED HIS EYES AND SAT UP IN BED. HIS EYES LOCKED ON THE digital clock on the nightstand as it clicked over to five thirty a.m.

After all the years of getting up at the same time every day to head into the office, his body had set its own eternal alarm, but unfortunately, it didn't know what weekends were. Woody was up at the same time, seven days a week, whether he needed to be or not.

Dexter raised his head, reluctantly pulled himself up and jumped off the bed. As soon as Woody was done relieving his bladder, Dexter followed him out to the living room and went over and tapped on the back door with his paw.

"Like you think I'm not going to let you out. We do this every morning."

Woody opened the top of the Keurig and pulled out the empty pod from the last cup of coffee. He replaced it with a fresh one, pressing the brew button.

Dexter tapped on the door again.

"Okay, okay! Geeze!"

Dexter ran out the door and started sniffing around the back yard, taking several minutes to select a spot before he lifted his leg and soaked it.

"Obviously, it was urgent," Woody muttered.

When Dexter had done his business, Woody called him back to the house, dog food bowl in hand. When Dexter didn't come inside, Woody sat the bowl on the counter and went out onto the back deck. Dexter was sniffing below the bedroom window, his nose caught on some scent.

"Come, Dexter. Let's eat."

Dexter stopped sniffing, cocked his head, looked at Woody, and then pawed at the ground under the window.

"Leave it. Come inside now. I don't want you digging up the yard."

Dexter paused again, mid-dig, and looked at Woody. He then looked back at the ground and pawed it again.

"Damn you, Dex!" Woody started down the stairs toward him and Dexter barked once, bounced on his haunches, his two front paws in the air, and then he took off running around the yard. Shaking his head, Woody went back inside and poured cream in his freshly brewed coffee and went to the refrigerator and pulled out the ingredients for breakfast. Dexter waltzed inside and sat in front of the counter, waiting for his food.

"Okay, so now you want it, huh?"

Dexter licked his chops.

Woody set the bowl down on the floor against the wall toward the dining room and prepared his morning omelet and sausage. He had a habit of cooking three eggs into his omelet each morning, but he never ended up eating the entire thing. Dex was a loyal companion, though, and somehow found a way, sacrifice that it was, to fit the remainder into his belly.

After breakfast, Woody cleaned up, took a shower, and changed into clean clothes. Even though he worked from home, he tried to be disciplined, stay clean, and get dressed each day.

By 6:55 a.m., he was sitting at his desk and logging into the company interface where he would promptly be connected to the queue at seven sharp. If there were any customers waiting for assistance, which there typically were, he would automatically be connected to the next one in line.

Woody's work shift was very straightforward and controlled. His breaks and lunches were regimented by the computer. As soon as two hours passed, the computer put him on an automatic fifteen-minute break the moment he finished with the customer he was helping. That usually gave him time to use the bathroom, get another cup of coffee, or smoke a cigarette. After four hours, the system pushed him out of the queue for an

hour lunch, and then another two hours after he got back, it made him take his final break. At quarter to four, the system would no longer assign a customer to his queue. Once he finished up with the customer he was currently helping, he was logged off for the day.

Of course, there were overrides built into the system that allowed a support person to alter their automatic schedule if an urgent need arose, but Woody refrained from using it most days as corporate sent you a nasty-gram if you used it more than twice per month. The last thing he wanted to do was be on someone's radar.

Because of this, Woody was shocked when at twelve minutes after ten, he clicked the manual override to start his lunch, before a new customer could be spooled to his chat window.

Confused, he watched as the countdown timer showed he had a little over fifty-eight minutes left before his shift started again. Woody got up from his desk chair and rubbed his right temple. Dex got up as well, wondering if playtime was coming early—Woody usually threw the ball for five minutes during lunch—and traipsed out to the kitchen.

Unsure of why he started his lunch early, Woody followed Dexter out to the kitchen and opened the back door for him when Dex tapped. On the deck, Woody sunk into one of the chairs that overlooked the yard and inhaled the cool air. An unknown worry tugged at the corner of his mind and he tried to reel it in…to grasp it, analyze it. A knot twisted in his stomach as dread kicked in. *You are in danger*, it seemed to say.

Being one that was typically in control of his body, this new turn of events worried Woody. He was a person that had never done drugs throughout his life, simply because he didn't want to ever feel out of control. He even shied away from over-the-counter medications if he knew they would make him feel loopy.

Now, here he was feeling out of control of his body. Simply put, he felt…well…*off*. Like he imagined a bad trip would be—except this trip made him want to simply squeeze his eyes shut tight, curl in a ball, and go to sleep until it passed.

A sound from inside startled him awake—he hadn't realized he dosed off—and he jumped up off the chair and ran inside the house. At his computer, the timer had elapsed for almost two hours and the system was prompting him to click that he was available and back on shift. Because he

hadn’t been at his desk when his lunch hour finished, the system started sending reminders to confirm that he was back, which then escalated to frequent chimes and flashing messages asking him to acknowledge he was available and ready to take a customer chat.

Woody knew he was going to get an email from his boss once the daily production report hit his boss’s desk in the morning, but he didn’t care. Woody clicked the override button asking to end his shift. When the system prompted the reason for his request, he checked the radio button labeled “Ill”, submitted the request, and then logged off the system. With the sun hitting the bedroom window, Woody pulled off his tennis shoes, wiggled out of his pants, pulled his shirt over his head, and slipped into bed.

Not understanding the break from regiment, Dexter let out a heavy breath, flopped his body down on the floor with a thump, got back up and turned around, then laid back down again. One minute later, Dex stood, jumped up on the bed, turned his back toward Woody, and plopped down next to him, his body stretched out against him. Woody didn’t notice as sleep had already consumed him.

Chapter Four

THE POWER IN HIS LEGS WASN’T SOMETHING HE HAD NOTICED THE NIGHT before. When sleep had overtaken him, Stone had slept most of the night as well as all day. At least it felt like an entire day had passed since he had curled up on his crude bed.

He wondered if he was nocturnal and was supposed to sleep during the day. Still, he didn’t remember stirring. He hadn’t even been awakened by the need to piss.

Now, his instinct told him to run blindly, and he followed it recklessly. When the landscape turned flat with little obstruction, he found himself sprinting over the flat land at a speed he could not fathom as being possible. Still, possible or not, he had the power. Another thing he noticed was he could run upright, or on all fours. Somewhere along the way, he adopted a hybrid gait—sometimes loping on all fours and sometimes only on the hind legs, depending on the terrain.

The light from the moon fell through a small sliver, leaving shadows alone to wreak havoc among the timid. Stone took advantage of the dimly lit sky and stayed close to the dark, lest he should be seen by an innocent, becoming the fuel that fed their nightmares.

The scent hit his nostrils before he saw it. He slowed his approach, cautious. He wasn't scared of what someone might do to him if they spotted him. He knew his new body could handle itself and he would always be the victor. Instead, he was scared of what he might do to them if they locked eyes. Even now, the thought and anticipation of that warm, sweet flesh brought him once again to that state of arousal. Bloodlust.

He spotted several tents scattered around the area. Farther off in the distance, several campers and trailers were parked. Why had his instincts pulled him to a highly inhabited campground? He was trying so hard to fight the need, yet here he was, a buffet surrounding him, like an alcoholic just hanging out at the bar.

Stone pulled his thoughts away from carnage, trying to focus one more time on what everything meant. He certainly couldn't have been put in this body to ravage and destroy. He had to have a higher purpose. Until he knew it, he would have to control his urges, which would be easier said than done.

Stone spotted the brick buildings then. A duplex of bathroom facilities that many campgrounds had. Curiosity overcame him. Stone scanned the campground, looking for movement. He saw nothing. Listening, he heard nothing but the crackles of a couple almost burnt-out fires.

He estimated it to be in the wee hours of the morning, long after the campers and partiers had slugged their last beer and crawled into their sleeping bags. Cautiously, he stalked toward the restrooms. He had to know.

At the door, he looked around again. Stillness. He wrapped a hand-paw around the pull handle, yanked, and slipped inside.

The room was illuminated by a dimly lit single bulb with a wire cage around it. Along the wall in front of him were two sinks; next to those were two urinals and, in the far corner, a stall.

Stone approached the sinks, looking down. Fear held his eyes to the porcelain. Fear of what he was. Fear that by acknowledging it, he would be destined to stay this way forever.

His eyes shifted to the stranger's in the mirror. The details of his face gave him no indication as to his identity. As he suspected, he wasn't human. He looked at the hair covering his body.

I have fur. I am covered in fucking fur.

His ears appeared to be canine, as were his snout and teeth, but this wasn't ordinary dog. This was dog on steroids and acid and anything else you could think of that took the cute, fuzzy image of a dog and made it terrifying. His jaws were long and powerful, his teeth razor-sharp, as if he could snap a tree trunk in half.

The reflection of his eyes pulled him closer, and he studied them—they were deep red, but semi-covered with patterns of black haze, as if a storm cloud was floating across the surface. The nose was black. He touched it with his hand-paw. It felt dry and cracked.

Catching the sight of his paw in the mirror, he pulled it away and studied it in the dim light. It was bigger than he remembered, almost the size of a catcher's mitt. His paws were connected to beefy forearms, his biceps bulging. The remainder of his body was built and powerful.

What am I?

He stepped back and took in his full seven-foot frame.

Almost like a wolf, but not really.

He thought how he walked upright when he wasn't running at great speeds.

Posture of a man. I think like a man. But what's with the dog suit I'm in?

Stone stared again at his head—his face. A strange creature stared back at him. He felt like he was a passive soul in an alternate life, but the face staring back at him was sinister and foreboding. If it wasn't him inside of the beast, he would have been scared shitless.

A scent caught in his nostrils, and he found himself back outside, scanning the campsite for movement. The scent was strong, sickly sweet and overpowering. He slipped into the shadows on the side of the building, famished, confused, angry, scared.

The click of a latch sounded, and Stone sensed movement from the restroom door—the one on the other side of the building. The scent intensified, and he heard the slapping of flip-flops as they flapped ground to heel, ground to heel.

Before he could react, she was there. Her face mere inches away from his. Her features locked in a portrait of fear, her worst nightmare realized.

The bloodlust took over and, with lightning-quick speed, Stone's claws from his right paw were clamped around the girl's mouth, her body pressed up against the stone wall.

"Don't…scream," he managed to growl, his throaty voice barely a whisper.

Her body trembled and her feet started fighting for purchase on the hard, dirt earth. It was then he realized he had underestimated his strength and he was holding her a foot off the ground.

He caught her heartbeat pulsing through her throat with his peripheral vision.

I must have her.

His face lowered to her neck, and she tried to scream, but he clamped his claw down tighter over her mouth.

"Scream again and die."

Her body relaxed.

The pheromones she gave off ravaged his senses. His mind was rent with conflicting emotions.

Rip her throat out. Her flesh is yours.

He raked one of his fangs across her delicate, white shoulder.

She's an innocent. You're not a killer.

His internal voice caused him to pause, looking into her eyes once again.

Is this what people look like when they know they're going to die?

A tear slid down her right cheek.

What the fuck am I doing? Was I really going to tear her throat out?

He slid her body down the rough surface of the wall until her feet touched the ground.

"Shhh…shhh, please. It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you, but I need you to listen to me."

She nodded the best she could with his hand clamped around her face.

"I'm going to uncover your mouth. Don't yell or it will be your last time. Do you understand?" She blinked rapidly and nodded.

Stone slowly removed his hand from her mouth.

"What's your name?"

Her lip trembled, but she said nothing.

“Please. I’m sorry I scared you. Your name.”

“S…Sarah,” she whispered.

“You can’t tell anyone about me, do you understand, Sarah?”

“Yes.” Her head bobbed up and down rapidly. “Yes, I understand.”

“If you say anything about me, I’ll come back for you.”

“I promise.”

“You sure? Not a word. Not to your husband. Nobody.”

“N…no husband. Here with the girls. Th…they wouldn’t believe me anyway. Please. Just let me go.” Hope blossomed in her eyes.

“Until next time, Sarah.”

She looked at him, unsure.

“Walk back to your camp. Don’t turn around. I won’t follow you.”

“How do I know? I don’t want to die!” Fresh tears sprung from her eyes.

“Because, Sarah, if I wanted you dead, you’d already be dead.”

She nodded, an understanding sifting to the top of her emotions. After one more glance, she turned, took a few steps, and then stopped. She did not turn around.

“What—?”

“It’s better if you don’t know,” he interrupted. “Please. Go. Before I change my mind.”

Before she made it twenty feet, he was gone.

Chapter Five

WOODY SAT UP IN BED, DISORIENTED. THE ROOM WAS DARK, AND NO LIGHT filtered through the window blinds. He looked over at the clock. Almost three thirty in the morning. Had he really slept all afternoon and all night? It was unfathomable.

His bladder screamed at him, and he kicked his feet over the edge of the bed. Dexter jumped off the bed and ran out into the living room.

“Oh shit. Sorry, Dex.” Knowing Dexter had been locked inside all afternoon and all night and hadn’t eaten, either, Woody scurried after

Dexter, flipping on lights as he went. He flicked the locks open on the back door, and Dexter tore off to the grassy area, stopping to relieve himself for an exorbitant period of time before he started sniffing in various places while he circled, searching for the right spot to finish his business.

Unable to hold it any longer himself, Woody went to the edge of the cement slab and drained his own bladder on the nearest plant. Dexter cocked his head sideways, looked between Woody and the bush, and then sniffed the bush.

"You aren't the only one that can mark shit around here," Woody said.

Inside, Woody scooped kibble into Dex's bowl and set it down for him and then rummaged around in the freezer for something to eat. Woody's stomach growled loudly, causing Dexter to stop eating and look up from his bowl.

After microwaving an individual frozen pizza, Woody sat down at the table and scarfed it down. He was still hungry after, and in the fridge, he found the leftover salad from two nights before. Only after eating it also did the hunger pains in his gut start to subside.

What is going on with me? I have never slept this long before.

He took inventory of his symptoms: exhaustion, muddled thoughts, lethargy. He knew he didn't have the flu or even a cold—the indicators just weren't there, so what could be causing him to feel the way he did?

Looking at the clock on the kitchen stove, Woody knew it would be time to wake up in an hour for work. Dare he go back to bed? His mind said no, but his body said yes.

With his decision made, he set his alarm clock just in case, so he wasn't late. He was asleep again within a minute of pulling the covers up to his chin.

Chapter Six

STONE SAT AND SWAYED BACK AND FORTH, HAVING RETURNED TO HIS cluster of trees, to his makeshift bed.

"I almost killed her. I almost shredded her throat."

That's what you do. You're a killer. You were built for this. Embrace it.

“No! I won’t embrace it. This isn’t me. I don’t know what I’m doing here. Let me out. Let me OUT!” he growled.

Don’t fight it. It’s in your blood.

Stone sprung to his feet and attacked the nearest tree, lashing out at it with his claws, landing thunderous punches against it, bending, twisting, breaking until it resembled something that had been caught in a hurricane.

“I can’t. I won’t. She was so innocent. So sweet. This isn’t me.”

His mind had no response.

“I refuse.”

Silence.

“I’ll kill myself first.”

Stone’s mind snapped to his latest concession. He would be too chickenshit to do it normally, but under the circumstances? He had no life. He was stuck in a body that embraced everything he abhorred. Could he really do it? Could this…this beast die? What would happen to him if the body no longer existed? Would his mind—his soul—go back to where they were supposed to be?

The memory of the bloodlust overcame him, looping through his thoughts. He had no choice. When it was time to kill, he would kill. When the grip of the disease steered his thoughts and controlled his actions, his mind was nothing but an unwilling passenger. Or was it? He had been driven to kill Sarah—to tear her throat out—yet he had somehow fought the urge. He fought it, and he won. He was in control then, and he could be in control again. He just had to want it…to fight for it. To hold on to the fact that good would always crush evil.

A scent hit his nostrils.

Not human.

His hunger unsatiated, he knew he must feed.

He silently got up from the ground and waited, listening, watching, smelling. A crackling sounded through the tree line to his left. He made his way to the edge of the pines, slipped into the shadows, and snatched the animal up before it realized he was even there.

His pride turned to panic as he realized he was holding a skunk. He didn’t need to have clarity to know how bad things were about to get, and without thinking about it, he ripped the skunk’s ass off—tail attached—and hurtled it above the trees like a hand grenade with the pin pulled, hearing it

land some hundred yards away with a soft plop. The animal was clearly in shock, and Stone immediately removed its head and tossed it to the side before crunching into the furry underbelly of the critter, blood and viscera splattering the front of him and the ground around him. He didn't stop until nothing was left but the fur pelt, the bones strewn about, laying where he had spit them.

Exerted, he slumped to the ground, the adrenaline from the hunt and feast subsiding.

He looked down at his paws, the flesh a crimson color.

Bile rose up in his throat as he tried to calm his emotions.

"Is this what I've become?" His body heaved with sobs as he blubbered into his hand-paws. He loathed himself. He wondered if the talon-like claws on his hands could rend his throat into strips of pulpy fur and flesh. If they could, would he bleed out? Could he die, or was he one of those monsters that was exiled to walk the earth for all eternity, feeding on the bodies and souls of others?

The house on the hill crept into his mind. There was a familiarity about it. He felt drawn there. Yet he knew he should stay away. Just like at the campground, he had been overcome. He was blinded by the need. He couldn't give in. He had to control himself.

But who was that person in the house on the hill? Why was he so drawn to it? Was it the key to all the mystery shrouding his identity? His new-found self?

Suddenly, Stone felt an overwhelming need to know what was behind door number one.

The way to the house was engrained in him, like a map built into a GPS unit. He did not falter as he traveled the distance to the overgrown hillside and started traversing his way up. The air was moist yet crisp. The slight breeze drove away the quiet. The stars were neatly tucked into their cloud blanket. It would still be dark for a couple more hours.

Outside the house, Stone settled down behind a row of shrubs. He waited. Daylight would soon come, and maybe his questions would be answered.

But you've never been out in daylight before.

He hadn't even realized how true the thought was until he had it, and he was overwhelmed by the accuracy. He pondered what that meant. Would

the sunlight turn him to dust like a vampire? Would he turn back into the man he was supposed to be? Anxious, he decided to wait it out. One way or another, he would find out what it was he needed in this house. The one on the hill.

Around five thirty a.m., Stone's attention was pulled to the window when a light popped on inside the house.

Chapter Seven

THE SCENT GREW STRONGER. A DOOR OPENED. STONE COULD HEAR THE jingle of a collar as a dog explored the back yard. He slunk back tighter behind the shrub, thankful the breeze was blowing away from the house. The dog went back inside.

Shadows cast against the now-covered windows as the figure inside moved around. Stone tried to imagine who was there and what they were doing inside.

Strange smells of food and fragrance wafted to him, ever so slight, yet they were there. Stone took deep breaths, his chest tightening as he felt that familiar urge.

I have to fight this. I'll never know what this is all about if I give in—if I lose my head.

Sounds permeated the structure as well. Footsteps. A playful bark. The hissing flame of a water heater.

Someone is getting ready to start their day.

A memory flashed.

Why is this so familiar?

He's in the shower himself, yet he had no fur.

Another spark.

Breakfast. Cooking food. Cooking inside on a stove.

Putting on clothes. Not naked. Not furry.

The bloodlust slammed into his senses and took control, and Stone had to physically pull his body back to keep it from ravaging that hole through the side of the house that he had many times fantasized about. The person in

there…they're evil. They're responsible. But how? And responsible for what?

He vomited onto the ground, so nauseous at the conflicting thoughts having a boxing match inside his head. He wanted to shred, kill, maim, but he feared that doing so would keep him from ever finding the answers that he was looking for. He pulled himself back, his body shuddering.

He listened, watched. The noises changed from room to room. The first glint of sunlight cracked over the horizon. Some of the shadows were pushed away. His mind snapped and then sprang back, clarity pouring into the void and filling every empty crevice. The bloodlust called for the final time. This time, Stone did not hold back.

The front door came off the hinges with so much force that it shattered the dining room table and sent the shards through the window on the far side of the house. The noise was like an explosion—deafening. As Stone scrambled through the door, he scanned the room. Empty.

A bark immediately started up from the hallway, loud, seemingly ferocious, the dog volunteering to lead the charge against a creature that it had never seen before, a creature that it underestimated.

Stone was surprised to hear a guttural growl come out of his own throat as he rushed toward the hall. Brave to its own detriment, the dog leapt through the air, latched onto Stone's shoulder, and tried to tear a chunk out. Rage overtook Stone, and he reached for the dog's throat, ready to tear it out.

Wait! You have a dog. You love dogs.

This epiphany threw Stone for a loop, and the dog started flinging its body back and forth, trying to use its weight to pull Stone to the ground.

Struggling to keep upright, Stone stumbled over to a door set in the wall by the stove. He flung it open to find a pantry. He stumbled inside, the dog hanging from his shoulder. He reached with his right hand and tried to pull the dog's mouth loose, but its jaw was in a death clamp. Out of options, and not wanting to hurt the dog, Stone grabbed the broom hanging from a hook on the wall and threaded the handle through the empty space at the back of the dog's jaw, the wooden rod pushing through the gap on the left side of its jaw and exiting the right side. Stone applied downward pressure on the broom handle, as if he was jacking a car up off the ground. Finally, the pressure proved to be too much, the dog loosened its grip, and Stone tore

his shoulder out from the teeth ripping into it, leaving the dog biting down on the wood handle instead. Giving the broomstick a twist, the dog was thrown onto its back, and Stone took the opportunity to run out of the pantry and slam the door behind him.

The dog went crazy and started tearing at the door with its nails, but luckily the door was solid wood, and the beast wouldn't be loose any time soon.

Stone turned back toward the hallway, a small rivulet of blood running down his shoulder. The brief scuffle with the dog had pulled his attention away from why he was here, but with the dog in time out, his rage returned. The bloodlust returned. He knew his purpose, and it was time to get his.

Obviously, the owner of the house knew Stone was there. He had lost any element of surprise he had when he knocked the door down. Rather than play a game of cat and mouse, he decided to go after what was his. Whatever happened, he could live with it.

Stone stalked down the hallway toward where he knew the bedrooms to be. He paused to look at a painting on the wall—it was one he remembered. He had passed it the night of the last Christmas party here when he had gone to use the restroom. It was cold. Sterile. Like the inhabitant of the house.

At the bedroom door, Stone heard a shotgun slide. He stepped around into the center of the doorway, the man inside standing beside the bed, the gun pointed in Stone's direction.

"I don't know what the fuck you are, but if you don't get out now, you'll be a dead fuck."

"Hello, Ron." The sound coming out of Stone's throat was cold, calculating.

"How…how do you know my name?" The gun shook in Ron's hands.

"Just like you not to remember. How does it feel to be the most narcissistic asshole on the planet?"

A trickle of familiarity flashed through Ron's eyes.

"I dedicated most of my adult life to that company. I put up with your crap for twenty-five years. And when I couldn't stand by and watch you shit on all the little people anymore, you instead turn on me? Ruin my life?"

"Woody? What happened to you?"

"*You* happened to me."

“I mean…are…are you some fucking animal?”

Woody grabbed the shotgun by the barrel and twisted, both shots firing, sending chunks of splintered doorframe in a shower throughout the room. Smashing the nearby window with the butt of the gun, Woody threw it outside on the back lawn.

“Now, where were we?”

“It wasn’t my…my fault, what happened to you. You did it to yourself.”

“Because I wouldn’t stand by any longer and watch you destroy people? Because I have a conscience? Integrity?”

“Because you messed up. You broke the rules and you had to go. You can’t blame that on anyone but yourself. I’m not going to take the fall for that.”

“Or at least that’s what you told them, right? That I broke the rules? That I was acting inappropriately? Who are they going to listen to? The narcissistic prick who nobody will stand up to, because they are scared of what he might do to them, or the manager that must have lost his mind overnight and done things that were extremely out of character for him?”

Ron glared at Woody, his eyes spewing hatred.

“You know, I never realized just how insecure you really were until right now. I wasn’t a bright light on your team to you. I was a threat. You knew I was smarter than you. Better than you.”

“Get out of my house, Woody. I’m calling the cops.”

“I’m afraid I can’t allow you to do that, Ron. Hey, did you know you destroyed my life? Yeah! True story. I pretty much lost everything. Oh yeah, you remember Marcy, don’t you? Yeah…funny thing about her. She’d dead. Fucking heart attack, Ron. Her ticker just couldn’t handle the stress of what our life had become, thanks to your generosity.”

“This is the last time I ask you to leave.”

“Or what? What, Ron? What are you going to do about it?”

“I’m go…goo…g—”

“Goo goo, gah gah,” Woody mocked. “What’s the matter, little baby Ron? You going to shit your pants?”

Ron sprinted toward the open master bathroom door and tried to slam it on Woody, who was already halfway through it before it was even partially closed. Trapped, Ron put the only barrier he could between Woody and

himself. He clambered into the shower stall and slammed the glass door between them.

Woody stopped, looking through the glass as if he were selecting a lobster from the tank right before he dropped it into boiling water.

Ron cowered, resolved in the fact he was in no way talking himself out of this situation. A rancid smell hit Woody's nostrils—urine and feces. The man had soiled himself.

Woody stared through the glass at the man that had ended everything for him. But it wasn't the material things that bothered him the most. It was the fact that he had lost all trust in humanity. This was the true end for him. In a world where he once mattered, he was discarded, tossed away by colleagues and friends. He had become a leper and a loner. He no longer had a purpose in life. He was merely sucking up oxygen in the atmosphere, waiting to die.

Woody's hatred soared, and he felt the raw, overpowering pull to destroy. To rip. To shred. To maul. He finally understood why he was drawn to the house on the hill and what his purpose had become. To live a good life was not going to be enough. It never had been. It never would be.

Woody's fist smashed into the safety glass, shattering it into a million fragmented pieces. Ron threw himself down into the corner of the tile, his arms over his face. Woody's claws shot out from his hands and he pulled back, ready to strike.

This isn't you, remember? You're not a killer.

That nagging voice in the back of his mind was back. It was right. He wasn't a killer. Never had been. He was a kind, compassionate, considerate soul who cared for others and nurtured them, not destroyed them. Who was he to play God? Who was he to decide what was fair? True, this guy was one of the biggest dirtbags he had ever met, but did that mean he deserved to die?

Woody lowered his right arm to his side. The claws retracted. The bloodlust drained from his eyes. Ron must have sensed the change. He lowered his arms, the fear in his eyes turning to wonderment.

The slash across Ron's face caught him off guard, and one of the claws hooked his left eyeball and pulled it out of the socket. It hung down by the optic nerve, bobbing against his nose.

"See you in hell, Ron, but just so you know, I'm going to be the one in charge this time."

Woody thrust his claws underneath Ron's ribcage and shredded up, pulling out everything he could grab a hold of, like he was removing the engine and transmission from a car. Ron's fluids leaked out of him and his mouth started working, as if he was trying to say something, but only a clicking sound emanated. Finally, his mouth fell open, his face in death mimicking the stupid look he carried on his face during his sordid, pathetic life.

Taking one last look at the carnage he had left behind—he hoped that whoever had to do the cleanup was thankful that he had kept most of the blood in the shower stall—he headed toward the front door. It was then that the barking and growling started up again on the other side of the pantry door, the nails joining in, most assuredly carving deep grooves on the other side of the door.

He must be hungry, Woody thought.

He turned and went back into the bathroom. The corpse looked pale and weak, and it was then Woody realized he should never have let that asshole have so much power over him. He bent down and lifted Ron's chin before grabbing the head in his hands, and with one quick twisting, ripping, movement, he detached the head from the body.

In the kitchen, he held the head in his right hand and grabbed the pantry doorknob with his left.

"Dinnertime!" he yelled, tossing the head inside and slamming the door.

Epilogue

"ANOTHER RUM AND COKE, PLEASE."

"Coming right up."

Woody drained the rest of his glass and waited for the new drink to be served. It wasn't that he had stepped up from beer to hard alcohol. He just liked to mix it up a bit now that he was getting out and socializing a little more.

"Here you go, Woody. Want me to put this on your tab?"

"That'd be great, Bruce. Thank you."

Okay, so he was getting out a lot. Every day, actually.

Woody had a different outlook on life since the morning of the incident that happened in the house on the hill. A house he had been to a couple of times for his company Christmas parties. A house that Ron had owned with his wife before she tired of his bullshit and took half of everything. A house that was on a five-acre lot in a sprawling mountain neighborhood approximately five miles away from Woody's property.

Answering the question of *why* he had changed into something else was a little more difficult. When he found himself back with his own body, in his own house, on his own hill, he was relieved to say the least, but the fear of turning back into that *thing* left him scared shitless. He turned to research—dozens of hours of it—to try and determine how it was all possible. The only random information he was able to turn up was a handful of police reports—all public record—where the old man that owned his home prior reported mysterious happenings on the hill. Some sort of altar he found in a clearing of trees. The sound of chanting carried on the wind. Dead animals. Later, the old man would report a run-in with a stranger and threats of a curse cast upon the property that had him fearing for his life. Woody couldn't help but feel that might explain them finding the dead man's bones months later. The police had thought he was crazy. Maybe he wasn't so crazy after all.

If Woody lived under a curse, there was a chance that he could change again if another huge injustice decimated his life. Rather than move, he decided to be careful—he did not ever want to put himself in a situation again where he woke up to a furry mirror.

Woody took a sip of his drink and pulled a cigarette out of his pack. He grabbed his Bic and lit it, exhaling the smoke up into the air.

"Excuse me."

Woody turned. A pretty girl that was probably in her thirties was standing there. He had noticed her playing pool with three other women earlier.

"Hi there," Woody said, unsure of what else to say, quite rusty at making small talk.

"Could I bum a smoke?"

"Sure thing. You run out?"

"Not exactly."

Woody raised a puzzled eyebrow.

“Um, well, I don’t normally smoke, but this seems like a good time to start.”

Woody laughed, a light, easy-going chuckle.

“What’s the occasion?”

“Not sure. Honestly, I’ve been sitting over there for the last two games wondering where I know you from. You look so damn familiar.”

“I don’t believe we’ve ever met, miss. Although now that you mention it”—he looked into her eyes—“I think I’ve seen you before, somewhere. Do you come here a lot?”

“First time.” She slid up on the barstool next to him.

“Well, we hopefully have time to figure it out.” He held out his hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m Woody.”

“Nice to meet you, too, Woody. I’m Sarah.”

CAECILLICA

Red Lagoe

All the small-town folk in the diner lifted their eyes as Tara entered. A grumbling man at the counter turned his head to side-eye the college student and her boyfriend.

“Jonathan!” A middle-aged waitress wiped her hands on her apron. Arms straight out, grabbing at the air, she hurried around the counter and ran to him.

“Nice of you to show your face,” the waitress said.

“Hi, Aunt Kathy.” Jonathan cracked a smile as his aunt embraced him.

It was the first time Tara had seen Jonathan smile since Garrison died in the car wreck last month. Since Jonathan’s car was totaled, Tara offered her vehicle for their weekend trip. It was the least she could do.

Tara swiped her hair over her shoulder and awaited an introduction that never came. Kathy glanced at Tara twice while Jonathan rambled something about his biology paper taking up too much time for him to visit. Jonathan

had been avoiding conversation about Garrison, which was fine with Tara. She'd be happy to forget his old college roommate ever existed. It was easier that way.

Jonathan swung a leg up to a bar stool at the diner counter.

"Want to sit at a table instead?" Tara asked.

"No. This is good right here." Jonathan rested his elbows on the counter and faced straight ahead toward the coffee maker.

Tara sat beside him, placing her purse on the counter. An inch of black sludge sat at the bottom of the coffee pot. Above the pot hung a framed black and white photograph. The old, out-of-focus picture intrigued her. A stark white, humanlike figure against a black backdrop. The edges of the figure blurred, but there was a bulbous domelike head—or maybe it was a hat. Long string-like features hung from the head and spread out from what could be arms and legs.

It reminded Tara of those lame fake alien photos that one might see in a diner in Roswell. Not that Tara had ever been there, she'd never really gone anywhere other than a trip to Cancun with her family when she was sixteen. She thought since it was spring break, she could talk her grieving boyfriend into traveling to Daytona Beach, or anywhere with palm trees for that matter. The relaxation would do him some good.

Jonathan was dead set on going home, and Tara had to play the role of supportive girlfriend. The prospect of vacationing at a tropical beach fizzled away, and Tara agreed to go to this dump of a small town.

"What's that supposed to be? Some kind of jellyfish?" Tara nodded at the odd photo.

The diner fell silent. A fork scraped on a dish behind her. When she looked over her shoulder, the diner patrons were back to talking and eating their breakfasts, uninterested in Tara.

Aunt Kathy raised an eyebrow while she poured the black sludge coffee into a cup.

Jonathan smirked. "It's the quarry ghost."

Tara let out a chuckle. "It doesn't look like a ghost."

"Oh, you've seen a ghost before?" Jonathan playfully nudged her shoulder.

"No. But if I did, I'm sure they wouldn't have a hundred tentacle thingies coming from their bodies."

Aunt Kathy leaned on the counter. “It’s not really a ghost. Back in the 1800s, there were some disappearances. People claimed they were seeing a ghost.”

“People still disappear,” a man at the counter grumbled, laid down a ten, and stormed out of the diner.

Kathy smirked. “Superstitious. All of them. Anyway, someone snapped this picture in the 1960s. The ghost wasn’t a ghost no more, but the name stuck.” Kathy wiggled her fingers like a witch casting a spell. “The Quarry Ghost.”

“People disappear around here?”

Jonathan sneered. “It was the 1800s. Of course, people went missing. There were no safety rules or anything back then, and they probably got themselves blown up.”

“Blown up?”

“They used dynamite to blow the rock quarry. Some say they blew it too deep.”

The door chimed as a police officer stepped inside. “Hi, Kathy.”

“Hey George, what are you doing all the way out here? Not enough going on in Stafford County?” Kathy winked. “Or are you here for my coffee?”

“Here on business today. You seen some kids come through here yesterday? Teens? They were making a movie out at the quarry. I got a call from their parents saying they made a live video out there about the ghost, and apparently, there was some screaming and now they’re missing.” Officer George scratched his head.

Tara’s stomach turned. Her eyes darted back and forth between the officer and Aunt Kathy, then back to Jonathan.

Jonathan leaned in close to her. “Probably trying to fabricate a found-footage video. I bet they’re holed up in a motel right now, letting people think they were killed by the Quarry Ghost.”

“Yeah,” Tara said, unsure if she was convinced.

“Anywho…” George continued. “They were driving a silver Focus. Four kids. Seventeen, eighteen years old. Their parents are worried. They never came home. No sign of the car.”

Jonathan whispered, “That means they left in their car. They’re fine.”

“I’ll let you know if I see them,” Kathy said.

AFTER BREAKFAST, TARA SAT IN THE PASSENGER SEAT WHILE JONATHAN drove her car up a narrow gravel drive toward his house. They pulled up to a two-story white farmhouse, probably as old as the town. A small gray barn sat to the right, and the sound of a trickling stream whispered on the breeze.

“My parents aren’t home yet.”

“Oh?” Tara ran her finger along Jonathan’s arm. They hadn’t had sex since Garrison died. She worried if she couldn’t get him to sleep with her again soon, he’d start to see right through her. Maybe he’d walk away from their relationship, and then who would do her bio assignments?

She leaned closer and dragged her lips along his neck.

Jonathan released a sharp breath and pulled away. “Come on. I promised you swimming in paradise.”

They left their belongings in the car while Tara stripped her clothes down to the bikini she wore underneath and a pair of flip flops. They hiked past the barn, where the creek seemed to vanish at the back wall of the rickety wooden structure.

She wore a pink bikini top and blue bottoms as she walked beside Jonathan. “So, is this swimming hole like a beach?” She swatted at a mosquito, leaving a streak of blood on her forearm.

“Not quite a beach. It’s just up here through that little thicket.” Jonathan’s hand brushed her knuckles.

Tara took advantage of the moment and snatched his hand in her fingers. His profile wasn't much to look at. A short chin, weak bone structure. A lanky neck. She had to admit, though, he wasn't a complete loser. It made dating him bearable, and sometimes enjoyable, even.

They stepped through some brush. A massive rocky pit gouged the earth. As big as a grocery store parking lot, and at least thirty feet deep, the half-moon rock walls defended a turquoise pool of water glistening in the afternoon sun.

Tara gasped. "That's beautiful."

Jonathan turned to her, taking both hands into his. "I know you wanted a beach and palm trees, but I think this is even prettier."

She wasn't sure if it was more beautiful than a sandy beach and crashing waves, but it was at least an effort. Jonathan wanted to make her happy, and this would have to do.

"I love it." She smiled and kissed him on the cheek.

"I appreciate you agreeing to come here with me. I needed to be home."

"Anything for you."

"This is the rock quarry." Jonathan gestured to the expansive pit.

"*The* rock quarry? Like, the ghost's quarry?" Tara stared into the water below, half-expecting to see the tentacled jellyman-thing down there staring back at her.

"They say…" Jonathan lowered his voice and pointed toward the pebbled shore below. "…that when they were blowing this pit with dynamite in the 1800s, they disturbed something living in the caves. An ancient being."

"Knock it off." A shiver skittered down Tara's spine.

Jonathan gave a devilish grin. "It fed on whatever came out at night—mice, raccoon, deer…eventually, it hungered for humans."

Tara rolled her eyes. "So, you're saying the jellyfish man eats people? I'm suddenly not so scared."

"Think about it. How long was it down there, evolving? Feeding off cave things. Then all of a sudden, humans come along and blow an opening into its cave. It comes out down there." He pointed to the darkest blue green spot in the water.

Tara stepped closer to the rocky edge of the cliff overlooking the water. "Now I know you're messing with me. You're too much of a science nerd

to believe that.”

“Evolution is science. Dinosaur bones probably made ancient humans believe some weird creatures roamed the earth. New species are discovered all the time.”

“Yeah. Like insects—”

“And cave-dwelling jellymen who feed on humans.” Jonathan dragged gentle fingers along her arm.

Tara laughed, leaning into him. “I wouldn’t mind being fed on by you.” She hooked the edge of his pants with her fingers.

“So, you offer yourself as a sacrifice?”

Tara wet her upper lip.

Jonathan stepped back. “Maybe I’m here to offer myself as a sacrifice.” He took off in a sprint toward the cliff’s edge.

Before Tara could scream, he jumped. Tara clutched her chest as Jonathan splashed into the water hole below.

“Jonathan!”

At least three stories down, a circle of white bubbles plumed to the surface. Jonathan followed.

“Damn it! You scared the hell out of me.” Her voice echoed off the cliff’s walls.

“It’s okay,” he yelled. “It’s extremely deep. Come on in.”

Tara measured the distance in her mind. She got on all fours and leaned her head over the edge to get a better look at the cliff. Concave enough that she didn’t have to worry about hitting it on the way down. Putting her life in danger wasn’t thrilling. She’d already dodged death and would like to play it safe from now on. But a little cliff-jumping seemed harmless enough.

Jonathan waded in the water. “Don’t worry. The Quarry Ghost is nocturnal. It doesn’t like the sunlight.”

Tara took a few steps back. She was a mediocre diver and swimmer on her high school team but never tried out at the college level. But part of her wanted to show off her skills, even if she didn’t go headfirst. She ran to the edge and leapt out with her best form, folding in half, then back straight. She bulleted through the air and within a second plunged into the water feet first.

Once under, she curled her body under and opened her eyes as she plunged deeper. Once her velocity slowed, she could make out the pebbled

bottom at least another ten feet below. Instead of popping back up, she decided to get some payback.

She swam away from Jonathan, toward the deeper, dark part of the swim hole. While he was up above, likely wondering if she whacked her head on a rock or something, Tara swam underwater, away from him. She'd pop back up in another thirty to forty seconds when she couldn't hold her breath any longer. For now, she'd swim away.

Tara looked behind to see Jonathan's feet kicking above, then continued on. Lungs getting tight, she'd have to resurface soon. Some sort of rocky structure sat at the bottom in the darkest part of the water. A coral reef of sorts, but that didn't make sense in fresh water. Tara swam closer.

She needed to catch a breath first. When she twisted her body to swim up, the light caught the reef-like structure at an angle. A vehicle sat at the bottom of the water. A silver Focus. Beneath it lay another one, a truck that was coated in a layer of green like it had been there a bit longer. At least a dozen vehicles were in view, many covered in a thick coat of algae.

Tara darted to the surface and took in a huge gasp.

"Tara!" Jonathan swam toward her. "Where are you going?"

Her arms stroked through the water hand over hand, until she reached a shallow pebbled shore and climbed out. "Silver Focus," she said.

Jonathan followed.

"Silver Focus." Out of breath, heart pounding, it was all she could manage to say. "Silver—"

"I heard you," Jonathan said. "Take a breath."

THEY NEEDED TO GET BACK TO THEIR PHONES AND REPORT THE TEENS' missing vehicle as being sunken at the bottom of the quarry. Tara rushed through the thick brush on an overgrown path, up the gradual slope that fed to the top of the cliff. Jonathan gained distance ahead of Tara.

"My phone is in my purse," she called out. "On the floor." What she wanted to do was to tell him to slow down. To wait for her in case some psycho killer was lingering in the tall weeds on either side of her. Whoever was responsible for the disappearance of those kids in the silver Focus could be watching her now, waiting for her to fall behind. Bare feet navigated the soft, trampled trail bed, occasionally jabbed by the rough edge of a weed stalk. The image of the blurry jellyman thing appeared in the corner of her eye. Just a passing shadow between the weeds, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something was there.

Jonathan cleared the brush at the top of the hill, leaving her behind.

"You call the police!" she shouted as he disappeared from sight. Tara hurried her pace, pricking the bottoms of her feet in her reckless trek toward the open field at the top of the hill.

She cleared the weeds at the top, where she had removed her cover-up and flip flops. She slipped them on and spotted the barn in the distance.

"Jonathan?" Tara high stepped through tall, soft grass toward the car, where Jonathan should have been grabbing the phone to make a call.

When she made it to the car, the purse was missing. Her heart sped, thumping against her ribs. Imagination ran back to the old 1960s photograph of the creature with stringy tentacles.

Common sense kicked in. Jonathan must have grabbed their phones and went inside to make the call. Tara snatched her pants from the seat and slid them on as quickly as possible. She ditched the flowy white cover-up and pulled her tee shirt over her head. Three steps toward the house, a faint yell sounded from a great distance. Another yell—muffled as if coming from inside the barn, but the sound of the creek water nearby washed it out.

"Jonathan?" Tara could barely whisper his name. More than anything, she wanted to run away. She was good at that—evading trouble. That evil nuisance Guilt crept in and told her it was wrong to take off. Wrong to leave now, even though she knew she heard someone scream from that barn. It could be Jonathan, clutched in the grip of some maniac. If she had her keys, she'd leave, but her purse was gone, along with her phone and her ticket out of Creepville.

She knew the way back to the diner. She could walk it if she wanted, but this time, she recognized it as the wrong thing to do.

It didn't seem so clear last month when she and Garrison got drunk and fooled around at a party. Terrified Jonathan would find out, she begged Garrison not to call him for a ride. Instead, Tara coerced Garrison into driving her back to the dorms, even if he was a little drunk. Tara had woken up in the passenger seat, Garrison bloodied and dead behind the wheel. No more than a scratch on her arm from shattered glass. She stumbled out of the car, into the ditch. Drunk and terrified, Tara ran from the scene. She walked all the way back to the campus, hiking a mile through the woods in the dark to get there. Everything in her being told her to fess up. To come clean about what had happened…but then both of their lives would be over. She'd learned her lesson and deserved another shot.

With Jonathan as her bio tutor, she was close to Dean's List. This was her chance to make things right. To do something with her life and make it count.

She dug through her glove compartment and grabbed her stashed utility knife. She flipped out the blade and headed toward the open door of the barn, following the remnant screaming voice that lingered in her head.

The sound of the rushing water grew louder. Tara stepped onto the ramshackle barn's dirt floor. A solid beam of daylight shone through the opposite wall where an opening allowed the creek to flow underneath. The

stream of water disappeared halfway into the barn among a cluster of slick boulders.

The wall to her right held ten framed family photos. Old-timey black and whites, people without smiles. Each photograph improved in quality as she scanned the line of pictures, but the families kept their steely serious glares. At the end of the row hung a color photograph of Jonathan, several years younger, standing with three adults; one of them was his aunt Kathy. There were five more snapshots, poor quality, blurry photos. A pale white glowing presence, reminiscent of a ghost. A long body with stringy tentacles where arms and legs should have been. Large black ovals for eyes.

The Quarry Ghost.

Burned-down candles were arranged in a semi-circle on the floor beneath the photographs. Etchings of the creature carved into old barn wood, along the walls like ancient cave drawings. Following the tentacles down the wall, they continued snaking paths along the dirt floor as pebbles pressed into the earth like a mosaic. Each stone appendage led to where the creek flowed into the earth. Tara stood over the hole in the ground, large enough to fall into if she wasn't careful. The rushing water echoed in the blackness, flowing into an underground well.

"You found it." Jonathan startled her from behind.

She spun around with her knife in her right hand, pointed toward him. When she realized it was him, she lowered it.

"Whoa, babe." Jonathan held up his hands. Tara's purse dangled from his fingers in one hand, her pink puffy keychain in the other.

"I thought you were dead!" she said.

Jonathan laughed. "Nope. Not me."

"I heard screaming."

Jonathan's lips curled into a half smile. "Me too. Aunt Kathy beat me to it."

"Beat you to what?" Confused, she waited for him to explain, but he said nothing. "Did you call the cops?"

"I'm not calling the cops."

"But the—" Tara cut herself off and tried to understand what he was up to. Why he wouldn't report the cars at the bottom of the quarry? What did his aunt have to do with the kids going missing? The metal handle of the

utility knife warmed in her hand, easily shifting in her sweaty palm. She squeezed tighter.

“My family comes from a long line of folks who make sure our cave dweller is content. It started with animals way back in the late nineteenth century.” He nodded toward the photographs on the wall. “But occasionally a person would go missing. After a few decades, animals weren’t enough anymore. It wanted people. Only people. So, we make sure to offer it what it wants, otherwise, people we love get taken.”

“Knock it off, Jonathan.” Tara stood with her back to the cave’s drop. Jonathan blocked her from moving.

“No, you knock it off!” Spittle flew from Jonathan’s lips as he screamed in her face. He threw her keys on the ground, just inches from the opening to the natural well. “You’re the one with all the secrets!”

Tara’s gut twisted.

“He was my best friend!” he said.

“I’m sorr—”

“Help!” a voice echoed from inside the cave.

Jonathan lunged forward, barreling into Tara. Flung off-balance, with the knife held away from her body, she was quick to reach for his shorts with her free hand. She hooked two fingers into a belt loop before she tumbled backward. The half-second seemed to slow in time, but not enough to save herself from falling. Her tailbone smacked into the slippery stone at the edge of the drop. Jonathan cried out as he crashed onto her. They slid down a steep slope. Headfirst, on her back, gravity and the rushing water carried her down slimy rock, but she managed to twist before spilling into an open chasm. They splashed into a pool of water. She hit bottom and stood as Jonathan fell from the opening above.

Eyes adjusting to the blackness, faint light grew brighter as she stood waist-deep in the water. Along the walls of the cave, bioluminescent lines ran like veins along the gray walls. The glowing things reflected off black water. The amplified sound of falling water drowned her panicked breaths.

Jonathan scrambled out of the pool to the stone edge. He pressed his body against the rock and dug through Tara’s purse.

“Ha! It still works!” He flicked on Tara’s phone; the screen lit his face.

Tara watched from the pool, frozen, unsure what to do other than cling to the knife she so desperately should have used.

The phone’s flashlight blinded Tara as he aimed it around the cave.

A teenager stood in the corner, holding up his hands to the light. He held a finger over his lips, then disappeared from sight as Jonathan moved the light back to Tara.

“Get out of the water!” the teen whispered.

Tara climbed out of the black pool, feet slipping on the slimy rock. She charged at Jonathan shoulder first, knocking him off balance.

“You son of a bitch!” she screamed. Her right hand clung to the utility knife. She poked it toward his belly, water dripping from her hair into her face. The glow of the phone’s light gleamed off the blade.

“You idiot,” Jonathan said, edging along the cave wall. “Now you’ve killed us both.”

Tara snagged the phone from his hands and shone the light at the waterfall pouring from the cave ceiling. Stalactites hung from above.

“You can’t get out that way,” Jonathan said.

“What if we climb—”

Jonathan whipped around. “You don’t understand! Everyone who falls down that tube never comes out.”

“Both of you, shut up!” the teen said. “There’s something down here. It killed my friends.” His voice broke. “We were just making a stupid video. We didn’t think it was real.”

Tara hit the boy with the flashlight’s glare. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Dark lines marked his forearms. He pointed to the lines. “It grabbed us while we were up there swimming last night. Sucked us underwater. I thought for sure I was dead, but then I surfaced underground. It was pitch black, but I heard them screaming. My friends. Jake and I crawled through a hole where we saw some light. Like glow worms or something in the rocks. But when Jake started trying to get his phone to work, it got him. These tentacles or something. It grabbed him. Sucked him through the hole.” His voice trembled.

“What’s your name?” Tara asked.

“Sam.”

“Hi, Sam,” Tara said. “We’re getting out of here.”

Jonathan slunk away out of sight.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Tara followed.

“There are two ways into this cave system. Up that hole…” He pointed toward the ceiling. “…or out through the quarry swimming hole.”

“You were serious…” Tara’s hands trembled from the chill of the water. “The Quarry Ghost? It’s real?”

“Well, that’s the silly name the townspeople gave it,” Jonathan said. “My family calls it Caecillica. And it deserves your respect.”

Tara’s heart tremored with her chattering teeth. The chill of the water clung to her skin through soaked clothes.

“It’s safe here,” Sam whispered. “I’ve been in this spot for hours. We can’t go back that way.” He pointed toward a black hole in the wall.

“There’s no other way out,” Jonathan said.

“Your parents. Or Aunt Kathy,” Tara said. “If we wait here, and call for her, she’ll have to call for help and get us out.”

“If I’m down here, nobody is coming to get me. Not even my parents. We’re on our own.”

“You’re on your own!” Tara said. “It’s your fault that we’re here.”

“No, it’s your fault,” Jonathan snarled. “You killed Garrison.”

“He killed himself by driving drunk.”

“And you were with him, encouraging him to drive.”

“That doesn’t give you the right to feed me to some giant cave jellyfish!” Tara pulled her hair away from her face.

“Shhhh.” Sam slipped toward the back of the cave, into the blackness.

“You deserve whatever happens to you,” Jonathan said.

“So do you.” Tara closed her utility knife and tucked it into her pocket. Stabbing him in the gut would be a mistake. He was her ticket out of the cave. That’s all he ever was to her, a ticket.

“Stop!” Sam said. “We have to stay as qui—” His voice cut off.

Tara directed the flashlight toward his voice to see pale gray tentacles wrapped around his throat. Sam’s eyes bulged as dozens of the long ropey extensions reached through a black void and slithered around his body. Skin sizzled as the appendages burned his flesh. Mouth agape, but Sam couldn’t release a scream. Slithering protuberances crept down his throat. The kid thrashed under the suffocating grip as the creature dragged him into a large black opening.

Tara chased after him, flashlight swinging. She stepped through a window-sized opening in the rock and into another pod of the cave. The

thick scent of mildew clogged her nose. There, under the glow of a thousand bioluminescent fungal growths, she saw the massive beast.

It stood in the water on two long legs, which branched into dozens of cords. A thick trunk of a body sprouted two more branch-like arms which split into more dangling projections. A large umbrella-shaped head sprouted countless tentacles. Like an enormous eight-foot-tall jelly fish, but humanlike in form. A faint glow emanated from its gelatinous body. Two football-sized eyes, vacant of expression, seemed to stare blindly at the prey in his grip.

Sam twitched.

The Quarry Ghost pulled him close to its center mass. Flesh sizzled under the burning of the stinging tentacles.

Tara screamed but silenced herself.

Jonathan grabbed her hand. She yanked it away as Sam's shrieks garbled.

The creature sucked Sam into its body. Sam curled into a fetal ball, floating in the midsection of the Caecillica. Flesh dissolved away from muscle and bone. His face melted from its skull. Dark blood plumed, then dissolved into its clear jelly mass.

Jonathan grabbed at Tara's hand again, this time gripping the phone. "Shine a light at it."

He lifted her arm to aim the phone's beam of light toward the monster.

The large eyes narrowed as it released a piercing hiss. It dove underwater. Its glowing body rippled the surface and retreated into darkness.

"Where'd it go?" Tara asked.

Jonathan now held the phone. Tara didn't realize he had yanked it from her.

She had no idea what to do other than follow him as he stepped through an opening in the rock wall. Part of her wanted to cut him in the back of the knee and get her phone back, but if there was anyone who could get out of this cave, it was Jonathan.

The panicked look on Sam's face haunted her. He had warned them to be quiet. If she and Jonathan had stopped arguing, Sam may have lived. As she stepped carefully on slick rock behind Jonathan, the image of Sam being devoured burned in her mind. Glowing fungi streaked the cave walls,

offering scant light. Tara focused on the flashlight's glow in front of Jonathan. Alongside them, an underground river ran. Somewhere deep inside, the creature had to be watching them.

She wanted to tell Jonathan to turn off the light so it would be harder to find them, but she didn't. Instead, she remained quiet. Not a word, like Sam warned. She allowed herself to fall back a few feet. If that thing came up, attracted to the phone's light, she'd be nowhere near it.

Seething rage oozed from her pores. How could Jonathan have been feeding this creature all this time? Tara steadied her breaths, deep and quiet. Bare feet traversed slippery rock, she climbed over boulders and clung to stalagmites for balance. They hiked in the near pitch black for what seemed like an eternity. It could have been five minutes or five hours.

She'd push Jonathan in the water if she thought she stood a chance. She'd run. Like she always did. It wasn't cowardly, not this time. It was a matter of self-preservation.

"You deserve this, and you know it," Jonathan said in the silence. His voice echoed.

She stopped dead quiet, refusing to speak.

"I know you're using me to get your grades up. And I know when Garrison was dying you fled the scene."

"He was already dead." Tears nipped at her eyelids as Jonathan dug into her heart. As if she didn't already live with the guilt.

A lap of water against the rock. Tara ducked down low and curled up against the wall of the cave, hoping to go unseen.

Jonathan shined the light at the black water. A gentle ripple disappeared.

Tara pulled the knife from her pocket and readied it in her grip.

The beam of light blinded her.

"Not everyone my family sacrifices deserves to die." Jonathan sighed. "But we've always tried to pick people with sketchy histories, you know?"

Tara waved at the light, tight-lipped. She held a finger to her lips to shut him up.

Jonathan kept the light on her.

"Mrs. Brenniman's cheating husband, for example." Jonathan danced the light beam across the water, then shone it back at Tara.

"What about those kids? What about Sam?" She tried to maintain a whisper, but it may as well have been a shotgun blast in the echoing cave.

Jonathan drew closer. “Aunt Kathy isn’t as thoughtful as I am.” He let out a laugh.

Tara stood, keeping the knife in front of her.

The water rippled again, drawing her attention as Jonathan took a step closer.

She pointed the knife at him. Her chest heaved, anticipating what she needed to do.

“You…” Jonathan took a deep breath. “…deserve to die.”

Tara stepped backward. Her foot caught on a branch or something firm; it cracked and rolled under her foot. She regained ground, and Jonathan shone the light at her feet.

A bone, maybe a femur. Beside it were several others, along with a human skull.

Her teeth chattered as tears poured down her cheeks. Her trembling hand could barely hold the utility knife steady.

“But you seem remorseful,” Jonathan said.

Between nervous breaths, she managed to speak. “I am.”

Jonathan drew closer, placing a hand on Tara’s arm. “Maybe we can both escape this.”

Tara held her breath as his fingers laid on her skin. She lunged forward, digging the short blade into Jonathan’s thigh. He screamed out, clenching down on Tara’s arm as he lost balance. Tentacles rose from the water and wrapped around his face.

Tara screamed as the pale gray glowing strings burned grooves across his eye, his nose, and his cheek. Another rope grabbed at his abdomen.

Tara yanked back, but Jonathan’s grip on her arm was too tight. She toppled with him and splashed into the dark water.

Below, Jonathan released his hold on Tara’s arm. Eyes open in the dark, deep water, she spotted a faint light in the distance. A blue glow, bright—like daylight. Tara swam toward it.

The light called to her at the end of an underwater cave. The distance to the outside world was too hard to measure, but she knew she’d need to get some air before entering that narrow hole, barely large enough to swim through.

She surfaced above water in the pitch black of the cave. Water splashed from somewhere nearby where Jonathan fought for his life.

Tara drew in a deep breath and went under. She swam as fast as she could, alternating between the dolphin kick and the fish kick on her side. She propelled forward.

A stinging sensation on her ankle caught her off guard. Her forward movement arrested. She fought to kick free, but another tentacle grabbed at her ankle, pulling her back into the cave. The faint glow of the outside world shrank.

Tara released a mouthful of air. Bubbles engulfed her, but she regained control of her last remaining breaths.

She bent toward her feet and cut her knife through the three stringy cables reaching out of the darkness. They snapped back, retracting into the black.

As Tara kicked to get away, the knife fell below, but she couldn't risk taking the time to find it. She pushed forward.

Tortured lungs begged for air. A few bubbles escaped through her nose as the light approached. She spilled out into the large pool where ancient vehicles and skeletal remains laid. The rock quarry. She swam up, reaching for the light above that couldn't get to her soon enough.

Tara popped to the surface and sucked in a huge breath of air, coughing, gagging, and nearly sinking back underwater. She pressed on with a breaststroke until her knees and elbows hit the pebbled shore.

The sun had dipped below the tree line. The purple blue haze of twilight. If any more time had passed, she wouldn't have had the light of day to guide her out of that hellish cave.

Tara sprinted up the hill where she and Jonathan had climbed earlier. She cut across the field toward her car. Her keys were still in the barn on the floor where Jonathan had dropped them.

She rushed through the door. Twilight's glow couldn't reach inside. The old rickety shack was nearly as dark as the cave. Tara edged closer to the water's entrance to the underground world. She knelt down and grabbed the puffy pink keychain. When it was secure in her hand, she spit into the water. "Look who doesn't deserve to die after all."

Turning from the water, she walked away. As she reached the door, hot burning ropes grabbed onto her belly. The pale gray tentacles squeezed.

Tara fell to the ground. Screams ricocheted off barn walls as the creature dragged her toward the water.

Fingernails dug grooves into the dirt floor. Her head whacked against the rocks at the cave entrance. Tara’s shrieks choked into silence as the creature pulled its prey into the cave.

MAGIC SHADOWS

Frank Beghin

Shortly after midnight, when Lena should have been asleep, the teen awoke startled and confused. Shivering as with fever, she gasped at the sinister shadows creeping about her room.

It was just a trick of the moonlight, of course, but for a moment she could have sworn the creatures were about to pounce.

Still shaking, she wrapped her blankets tightly around her, and her uneasiness, instead of dying down, inexplicably grew.

Something was wrong.

In the dim light of the bedroom, surrounded by an alien landscape, a horrifying detail snuck up on her.

I don't know where I am!

Her breath caught in her throat, and panic, like an old friend, brushed up against her.

No! I won't let fear control me.

She looked around her room—*is this my room?*—hoping to find something familiar, anything to trigger her memory.

This has happened to me before, she realized. *I don't know how I know this, but I do.*

A mangled teddy bear with button eyes—one eye was dangling from its socket—caught her attention.

It was sitting at the foot of the bed, with its head tilted to one side, watching her with great interest.

"Hello," it seemed to say. "Remember me?"

Instead of being frightened, Lena laughed. Sitting up in bed, she reached for the stuffed animal. At its touch, she felt a warm glow inside.

"Of course I do," she said as she hugged her furry friend, "and I'm sorry I keep forgetting to fix your eye."

Fond memories of her childhood flooded back as she rubbed its well-worn fur against her cheeks.

With tears trickling down her face, Lena mouthed a silent thank-you.

Although greatly relieved, a deep sadness washed over her.

Her periods of dismay and confusion were occurring with greater frequency, and the teen was terrified one day she'd lose herself completely.

I wish Nana was still here, she thought wistfully. *She'd know what to do.*

Her confidence in her grandmother was charming, but to speak with her beloved Nana, she'd need a Ouija board—not that she knew how to use one.

I miss her so much.

Lena's eyes welled up again, and her grip on the bear loosened. Almost immediately, she felt a tickle in the back of her mind. Frowning, she looked down at the strange creature in her arms, momentarily confused.

The stuffed animal's blank, hapless expression did little to comfort her, and yet, she was convinced it was trying to tell her something.

"What is it?" she asked with a shallow breath. "What do you know?"

Her voice, though barely a whisper, uncurled like a thick fog, heavy and opaque in the twilight air.

Then, in a night that was already unusual, something peculiar happened.

Tremulous clouds passed the full moon outside her window, making shadows dance across her room. Shapes and profiles of all sizes ran across

the walls reminding her of the shadow puppets she so loved as a child, but these dark images mirrored fragments from the past—her past!

There she was as a child, learning to ride her first two-wheeler: the outline was unmistakable. A tenacious girl in pigtails—*was I seven or eight*?—wobbled uneasily on a bike decorated with a horn and ribbons, teetering this way and that. Her patient and caring Nana followed closely behind.

Before Lena could savor the memory, the shadows quickly regrouped, and another scene unraveled.

A bus with wings soared through the air, making a transatlantic flight. It landed in the northern area of a familiar boot-shaped country. Soon, Lena saw a young girl, on the brink of womanhood, riding a gondola under a star-filled night.

Instead of singing the traditional “O Sole Mio,” the gondolier offered a local ballad, much to Nana’s delight. Comical music notes floated on the wall, and Lena could almost hear the melody playing in her head.

The shadows reformed once again; quicker this time.

Two young lovers were caught under a crescent moon, sharing their first kiss.

Tyler had finally worked up the nerve to ask me out on a date, Lena recalled, barely suppressing a grin, *while I had been waiting all semester for him to notice me.*

A bitter taste formed in the girl’s mouth, as if preparing her for what was to come next.

Lena gasped as the two figures were ripped apart. Their cartoonish profiles screamed in silence.

They were flung to opposite ends of the room, and the images coalesced with the surrounding darkness.

Inkblots grew on the popcorn ceiling above her, demanding the teen’s attention. Like menacing rain clouds, they began to swirl, and Lena was caught in the eye of the storm.

Something’s coming—and I don’t want any part of it.

Lena’s teddy bear, unable to help her, lay impotent in her arms. Or maybe it wisely knew some things could not be avoided.

From far off, she heard the sound of rumbling thunder.

With trembling fingers, Lena reached for the lamp on her nightstand, hoping to dispel the frightening darkness. She clicked the switch, but nothing happened. No light illuminated her room—none except the pale light of the moon.

Not once did the girl cry for help. The stranger she called “Father” lay asleep in his own room just down the hall, but Lena’s dad was oddly absent from her mind.

Within the twisted kaleidoscope above her, the theatre of shadows continued, and with rising unease, Lena saw the outline of a brooding figure appear.

A fountain of tears rained off the silhouette’s body, and its shoulders shuddered uncontrollably.

At first the shape was unisex—no telltale signs to identify its gender—but the forming scene left little doubt to the shadow’s identity.

It was another version of Lena—from just over a year ago. Her younger self was watching desperately as a loaded station wagon disappeared over the horizon. The vehicle’s lone passenger—at least, the only one who mattered—sat in the back seat coping with his own grief.

Tyler wanted to run away with me, Lena recalled with watery eyes, *but I couldn’t do that to Nana—even if his family was moving to the other side of the world.*

“The other side of the world” was, in fact, only two states away, but for two impassioned teenagers, the distance apart was unbearable.

Only her grandmother’s sickness had kept Lena from following her heart—a sickness that had started with a dry, hacking cough.

“*Non è niente*, Bella,” her grandmother had tried to chime, after noticing Lena’s worried eyes.

Despite Nana’s claim, Lena had found a crumpled-up handkerchief with traces of blood hidden at the bottom of the laundry heap.

The shadows above the teen rapidly reformed.

No.

Various tombstones sprouted from a dark, empty terrain.

Please…I don’t want to see this.

An assembly slowly gathered around a single cross-shaped marker. The profiles of the mourners were expressionless, reminding Lena of the stone heads from Easter Island.

Nana…why did you have to leave me?

A muffled sob escaped the girl's lips. She couldn't understand why this was happening to her.

After the funeral, two lone figures remained behind, watching over the gravesite—a tall, lean man with a slight build, and Lena.

The stranger was fretful, shifting his weight from one leg to the other, almost as if he was impatient.

Finally, he put his arm around Lena, but not to comfort her: it was only a pretense to pull her away.

The Shadow-Lena resisted. She didn't want to leave with this man she barely knew, but his grip on her tightened, and despite digging her heels into the dirt, she was dragged away.

Lena—the one who was currently snuggled in her bed with her teddy bear—frowned.

It hadn't exactly happened that way, she recalled, grumpily, *but it might as well have been.*

She blew a loose strand of hair out of her eyes before reflecting on what to do.

Again, she glanced around her room with barely any recognition, but this time it wasn't because of amnesia.

I don't want to stay here. This isn't my home.

The wall opposite her was barren, and its dull, yellow color—which was peeling in some areas—reminded her of the sterile, disinfectant hallways of a hospital.

Absent were the posters of Shawn Mendes and Nick Jonas Lena always had in her room.

She longed for the makeup table and matching chair Nana had given her last Christmas.

And her closet still had most of his stuff in it.

But even if her father took all of Lena's possessions out of storage and redecorated the bedroom to his daughter's minute specs, this place wouldn't feel like home.

It never would.

Lena's father hadn't seen his daughter in over fourteen years, but despite this, the state had made him her legal guardian. She had no other living relatives.

At first, her dad—*I'll never get used to calling him that*—had been indifferent toward her, but Lena now suspected it was just a ruse.

In the past week, there had been too many leering glances and stolen moments—moments where he brushed his body up against her, "inadvertently."

He always apologized afterward, blaming his clumsiness on the tiny space of his crammed apartment.

Yesterday, when she was bathing, Lena had heard a disturbing sound, like someone was trying to jiggle the lock to the bathroom.

Peering from behind the shower curtain with soapy eyes, she could have sworn she saw the doorknob turning. Horrified, Lena called out, and the rotation of the brass handle stopped. After a pause, receding footsteps could be heard in the hallway—or was it just her imagination?—on the thin carpet outside.

Good thing the bathroom door has a sliding bolt lock as well, Lena thought, but her brow furrowed as she realized her troubles were only beginning.

The moon outside slipped behind a cloud, and everything faded to black.

Lena bit her lip.

Is it over?

The darkness was so complete, and the silence so unnerving, Lena wondered if she'd ever go back to sleep.

Suddenly, there was a flash of lightning, and a photo negative seared itself on the bedroom wall.

Lena shut her eyes quickly, but not before a single thought pierced her mind.

He's awake!

The afterimage floated behind her eyelids, taunting her.

She saw the dark shape of a man, sitting upright in bed. The posts of the bedframe were like the gnarled, twisted branches of a decaying tree.

Holding her breath, Lena listened intently, but all she heard was the rumbling of not-so-distant thunder.

She felt the thin hairs on her arms stand on end, like the room was electrically charged.

There was a second flash of lightning, and Lena winced.

She didn’t want to open her eyes, but curiosity got the better of her.

A series of animated shadows burst on her wall, each more disturbing than the last.

A hulking figure was shown stumbling out of bed, reaching for a slender half-filled bottle on his nightstand.

He took a long swig before he let the bottle drop to the floor, where it landed with a distinct and improbable thud.

This is really happening, Lena despaired, and she fought the urge to hide under her bed.

After pulling the top drawer of his nightstand open, the Shadowman selected a strangely shaped apparatus. He let it dangle from his hand like a prize fisherman’s catch, and he jingled it like a set of keys.

How am I hearing any of this?

The object consisted of two circular rings, each about the width of her hand, and they were linked together by a flexible, narrow strip.

Lena’s eyes widened in terrifying recognition, and she clasped a hand over her mouth to stop herself from screaming.

No, no, no! I’ve got to get out of here!

Lumbering toward his bedroom door, the Shadowman added a little swagger to his step.

A haunting tune escaped his lips before Lena realized the whistling was coming from down the hall.

A crack of thunder dispersed the melody before the shadows vanished, and darkness reigned once more.

The rustling wind outside hissed as heavy raindrops exploded against her window.

A switch was flipped, and light seeped out from beneath Lena’s closed bedroom door.

He’s coming!

With her thoughts and fears swirling, Lena wished she could turn into a shadow herself and melt into the surrounding darkness.

She wondered if she could wedge a chair under the doorknob to stop him from coming in.

But the teen—who had yet to complete her junior year in high school—was rooted to the spot, barely remembering to breathe.

The door slowly creaked open, and Lena saw the looming figure standing in the hallway.

He's here!

"Hey, Baby," he called. "Couldn't sleep either, huh?"

Lena hated it when her father called her Baby.

"Storm got you spooked?" he asked.

She swallowed hard, unable to reply. She could smell the alcohol on his breath from across the room.

Swaying on the balls of his bare feet, her father waited as if he needed her permission to come in—which he did!

He can wait till Hell freezes over! Lena thought. Her annoyance was rivalled only by her fear.

"I thought I'd check in on you," her father said. "It must be rough being in a new place, especially with a storm raging outside."

If it weren't for his slurred words, the concern in his voice would have sounded almost genuine.

Leaning against the door frame with one hand behind his back—no need to guess what he's hiding—her father didn't seem to care that he was dressed only in boxer shorts and a sleeveless, ripped top.

"I know we haven't had much time to talk," he continued, brusquely. "I mean really talk…you know, get to know one another better, but I figured you needed some time…to better understand your situation." Her father placed unnecessary emphasis on his last word and pronounced it as "shituashun."

Before Lena could fully grasp what he meant, he took a jarring step forward.

So much for needing my permission, Lena smirked.

Her father's steps got bolder as he strode across the room. Before he sat at the foot of Lena's bed, he switched on the lamp on her nightstand.

This time the bulb flickered to life.

The light cast a shadow of her father on the far wall, but something else poked through—a circular ring mostly concealed by his outline.

"You shouldn't be here," Lena croaked.

Her father reeled back as if struck, and his blue eyes—partially hidden by his unruly, blond hair—narrowed.

He tried to bounce back with a disarming smile but only managed a cross between a lopsided grin and a sneer.

“Hey, it’s okay.”

He faltered.

I don’t believe it! Lena thought, raising an incredulous eyebrow. *Doesn’t he know how wrong it is for him to be here—especially in his state? And walking around in his underwear is definitely a no-no.*

She hugged her teddy bear tighter to her chest.

“It’s this whole daddy/daughter thing bothering you, right?”

Her father didn’t have a clue.

“I get it. You’re freaking out right now…but you don’t need to.” His words tumbled out like a half-hearted confession. “Everything will turn out fine, you’ll see.”

“How?” Lena sniffed.

I’m not going to cry, she thought, adamantly, but she couldn’t stop her bottom lip from trembling.

“Your mother didn’t understand me, either,” he said. Bitterness flashed across his face, and crocodile tears welled up in his eyes. “But she had no choice. She had to play along.”

“W…what do you mean play along?”

Her father looked at her, cryptically.

“Your mother was already pregnant when I married her.”

Lena spoke without thinking.

“Weren’t you guys on the pill?”

Her response was sarcastic, but it was mostly a gut reaction generated from fear. Her father, unfortunately, didn’t see it that way.

“This isn’t a joke,” he snapped. His boyish good looks crumpled, and Lena saw venom in his eyes.

“Your mother had a sharp tongue as well. Fat lot of good it did her. Some jams you can’t talk your way out of.”

What’s he talking about? Was Mom in trouble?

Her lack of understanding was transparent, and smugness crept into her father’s voice.

“Haven’t figured it out yet?”

The troubled teen shook her head.

“My name may be on your birth certificate, but your mother and I didn’t know each other until after the wedding—and I mean *know* in the biblical sense.”

Lena’s mouth fell open, but no words came out.

Was her father amused by her bewilderment? One corner of his thin lips twitched suspiciously.

He placed his free hand on Lena’s covered knee and gave it a playful squeeze, like this was a joke after all—a horrible, twisted joke! The only thing missing was the punch line.

And I know what it is, Lena thought, dismayed. Her eyes darted to his bent elbow, anxiously dreading the surprise behind his back.

I’ve got to keep him talking.

Despite the dryness in her mouth, Lena forced herself to speak.

“Why—”

But her father cut her off. His right leg shook as he bounced the heel of his foot restlessly on her wood floor.

“Why would I marry a woman knocked up with another guy’s kid?”

Lena shrugged her shoulders and then nodded.

“That’s easy to explain.”

As easy as keeping your hand glued to my knee, you pervert! A slight flush was growing on Lena’s cheeks.

“But I don’t think that’s what you really want to hear.”

Her father—*No! He’s not my father. He’s a shadowman!*—leaned forward, making the girl cringe.

Although terrified of the answer, Lena couldn’t hide from the truth any longer.

“Why…why’d you take me in after Nana died,” she said, hoarsely, “if I’m not your daughter?”

He gave her a wistful but eerie glance.

“You look so much like your mother. I thought I was given another chance.”

“A…another chance for what?” Lena stammered.

He winked at her before snatching her covers away. It happened so fast, she didn’t have time to protest.

Lena had worn an over-sized Hello Kitty t-shirt to bed that extended to her knees, but it had ridden up during the night, and now it barely covered

her panties. She felt naked.

And the way his eyes seemed to caress every contour of her body made her flesh crawl.

With his index finger, he casually traced a path along the inside of her milky, white thigh.

Panicking, Lena flung her bear at him. It bounced harmlessly off his muscular shoulder and tumbled to the floor behind him, inspiring her "father" to laughingly bark like a madman.

If Lena hadn't been so scared, she would have noticed her furry friend's eyes begin to glow.

"There's no need to be afraid, Baby," the Shadowman said in a mockingly, singsong voice before edging closer toward her.

Lena tried to pull away but, in her struggles, she succeeded in only tucking one leg beneath her. The other remained trapped by his vice-like grip, but not before his hand had slithered down to her ankle.

Desperately, Lena tugged down on her shirt, hoping to cover as much bare skin as possible. She tried to retreat, but her back brushed up against the wooden bed frame. Her pillow—another layer of protection denied her—had slipped to the floor.

With a forceful jerk of her leg, the Shadowman sent Lena sprawling on her back, but not before her head made a noticeable clunk on the headboard.

Pain erupted at the base of Lena's skull, and she saw stars. Stinging tears leaked from the corners of her eyes, blurring her vision.

Vaguely, she was aware of her t-shirt riding up, as her body was dragged toward…something.

Goosebumps erupted on her arms and legs.

She saw a shimmering ghoul looming over her, and it grabbed her left wrist. It muttered dully, but Lena was able to decipher most of what it was saying:

"It's just a game, Baby," and "Your momma and I played this all the time."

Was this meant to soothe her?

The touch of metal on her skin, like she was being fitted for a charm bracelet, set alarms off in her head.

Don't let the Shadowman trap you!

Instinctively, she brought her leg up hard and felt her knee connect with something soft and vulnerable.

There was a grunt, and the ghoul doubled over, falling to the floor. On its way down, the creature reached for the nightstand to catch itself but knocked over the lamp instead. The bulb flared briefly but refused to go out. As a result, objects closer to the ground cast longer shadows.

The whole room appeared to have…shifted.

Time stopped.

The storm, which had been raging incessantly outside, was silenced.

And despite the throbbing in her head, Lena saw things with greater clarity.

The ghoul—who wasn't really a ghoul, but neither was it her father—lay on its side frozen with a permanent grimace smeared on its face.

Beside it, sitting in the upright position, was Lena's teddy bear. Her furry friend's gaze was focused intently on the opposite end of the bedroom.

The urge to flee was overwhelming, but the tug on Lena's arm caught her by surprise.

Her left hand was shackled to the bedpost by a pair of glinting handcuffs.

Some charm bracelet. Now what do I do?

The queasiness in her stomach, although steady, had yet to escalate, but that would soon change if she couldn't escape the Shadowman, and the last thing she needed was a full-blown panic attack.

If I scream, will the neighbors hear me?

A spasm of movement caught Lena's eye.

On the far wall, elongated shadows remained fixed—including her tormentor's twisted outline—like leftover cardboard cut-outs from a Halloween stage play.

The teen narrowed her gaze.

Something's different, she thought but quickly corrected herself.

No! Not different. There's something new.

Even though askew, she recognized the multiple shades from before—all except one: Lena's teddy bear now cast a shadow of its own.

The tepid night air—interrupted only by her irregular, shallow breathing—began to hiss.

"What the hell you do that for?" the Shadowman blurted.

Her tormentor was back, and he was seething with rage. He lay on the floor in the fetal position with both hands cupped around his injured groin.

Outside, the storm renewed its onslaught, and little could be heard above its ghostly wailing.

For better or worse, this will be over soon, Lena thought. She was sure of it. And yet, she wasn't afraid, not really. Oh sure, she freaked out a bit when she bumped her head and having a stranger danger episode—in her bedroom, no less—would give anyone the jitters. But now, when things were coming to a close, Lena was oddly calm.

She wondered if it had anything to do with the growing shape on the far wall.

Watching the fallen figure struggle to his knees, Lena almost felt sorry for the Shadowman. He had no idea what was coming for him.

"You don't have to do this," she said, in what she hoped was a sober voice. There was still a chance he'd come to his senses.

The Shadowman responded by calling her a name not fit to print.

Oh! Lena flinched.

Well…maybe I'll just see how things play out, then, she decided.

Behind the Shadowman, the dark, fluid figure reached its full height. It stood menacingly over the smaller predator's shadow.

"I was going to take it easy on you," the unsuspecting man said, panting heavily, "it being your first time, and all."

There was a low, guttural sound, almost like a growl, but more threatening—and only Lena could hear it.

"But now I'm going to be as rough as I like—which is very rough." He was still wincing with pain, so his attempt at a vindictive sneer was almost comical.

The thing that floated on the teen's bedroom wall was monstrously huge—at least eight feet tall and as wide as three linebackers standing side by side. She wasn't sure if shadow accurately described the beast—it was too intricate in design, like a charcoal portrait come to life. Before the Shadowman lunged at her, Lena had time for one last curious thought.

If this is an artist's rendering, then who's the artist?

She felt the tips of her tormentor's calloused fingers brush just beneath her chin and, closing her eyes, waited for them to wrap around her neck.

The garbled cry that followed didn't surprise Lena—*at least it isn't mine*!—but once the Shadowman's corrosive touch receded, she heaved a sigh of relief.

Opening one eye cautiously, and then the other, Lena saw her tormentor's pallid, bug-eyed face. A startled "O" had formed on his thin, dry lips, and a throbbing vein stood out on the right side of his neck. He was slipping away.

"Something's got me!" the Shadowman howled. To Lena, he looked like a drowning man struggling against a vicious undercurrent. Gripping the bed sheets with white-knuckled fists, he did his best to anchor himself.

On the opposite wall, the dark shape stretched open its massive jaws, and its jarring roar silenced the chaos outside.

"What was that?" the Shadowman gasped, not daring to turn around. Sweat creased his brow, and his boyish good looks withered to a pale, ghostly shell.

He tried to lurch forward but succeeded only in remaining in place. His fingers clung desperately now to the wooden frame at the base of the teen's bed. His legs were splayed out on the floor as if locked in a weird stretching position.

An invisible force, intent on dragging him away, refused to let go.

There was another roar, and Lena saw curved, spike-like talons swipe at the smaller shadow.

The frightened quarry shrieked. The Shadowman's shirt—already torn—was ripped open completely by unseen claws, and streaks of lacerations erupted on his back.

The beast snorted. It shook its massive head callously, and Lena could make out the long, thick fur on its humped shoulders. The hair on the outer edges was peppered with spots of gray, giving the beast a grizzled look.

Using its full body weight, the shadowy creature pushed down with its front paws on the weakened adversary, sending the smaller shadow crumbling to the floor.

At the same time, the Shadowman lost his grip and collapsed like an overloaded suspension bridge.

Lena lost sight of her "father," but she could hear his groans of pain.

The bed lurched forward, jostling the teen. Lena winced at the high-pitched scraping noise the legs made against the hardwood floor of her

room.

She saw a pair of dangling legs next, hanging impossibly in midair. The Shadowman was caught in some kind of pull—like a dust bunny being sucked in by a vacuum cleaner: except this dust bunny was clinging desperately to the wooden supports of Lena's rickety bed frame.

I guess that explains the poltergeist swaying of my bed, Lena thought.

The Shadowman's face appeared from behind the wooden frame close to the floor. Beads of sweat were dripping down his temples, and tears were spilling from his haunted, pleading eyes.

"Please, Lena," he stammered. "Help me. I can't hold on much longer."

There was a moment of hesitation, no more than a second or two, and then, to Lena's credit, the girl reached out her right hand with an unmistakable sense of urgency.

Relief shone in the Shadowman's eyes, and a weak, tremulous smile creased his tortured face.

But his promise of salvation was cut short when Lena jerked to a halt. Despite her best efforts to reach him, something held the teen back. It was impossible for her to get any closer.

As the Shadowman's troubled gaze shifted warily to the left side of Lena's bed, the girl glanced over her left shoulder as well, knowing all too well what she'd find.

Lena was held in check—and barred from helping the Shadowman—by a pair of glinting, unforgiving handcuffs.

"No!" the Shadowman cried. "Oh God, no!"

There was another forceful yank, and the man who was supposed to be Lena's guardian lost his only foothold to the mortal world. He was dragged into the shadows, begging and crying for help.

As he merged with the darkness, he dissolved into a strange, ebony mist. The vapor hung in the air like a discarded puff of smoke before being inhaled by the wounded caricature on the far wall.

There was a pause.

Lena's mouth was dry, and her throat ached. She wished she could huddle under her blankets and hide from what was about to happen next.

Then, with a roar, the beast brought down its hungry claws and shredded its smaller foe, splitting it into fragments of fading darkness.

Lena couldn’t help it—she screamed, and the beast’s large, concave profile tilted toward her.

No. Don’t look at me. I’m nobody special.

Two yellow slits appeared above its long muzzle, flashing into view like the headlights of a transport truck ready to bear down on her. Caught in that sudden glare, Lena panicked.

She pulled frantically on the handcuffs, almost tearing a gash in her left wrist, but without the key, Lena couldn’t escape. And she’d need superhuman strength to break the wooden bedpost anchoring the handcuffs.

The rational part of her mind told Lena she was safe on her bed—there was no way the shadow could reach her.

And why would it hurt me? Lena thought as she tried to ignore the jackhammering in her rib cage.

There was a tearing sound, like a page being torn out of a book, which sent icy ripples coursing through Lena’s bloodstream.

The thing—beast, creature, or ghoul—was peeling itself off the far wall. It entered the third dimension still in its shadow form—like a deranged escapee from Edwin A. Abbott’s Flatland—and lumbered toward her.

“Stay away from me!” Lena screamed. She wished she had something heavy to throw at it.

Can I even hurt a shadow? Lena wondered.

The beast’s murky scent—which was hidden earlier—drifted lazily toward the teen, tickling Lena’s nose, but there was a faint aroma of something else, almost pleasing.

Pine?

The teen was more confused than ever, but this didn’t lessen her terror.

The beast paused at the foot of her bed, while Lena retreated as far as she could. There was very little wiggle room.

Something was wrong with the creature’s left eye. It flickered on and off like a dying flashlight.

Maybe it’s winking at me, Lena thought and immediately bit her lip—hard. The last thing she needed was a noxious fit of hysterical laughter.

“Lena.”

The girl gasped.

The beast spoke in a garbled, strained voice like its mouth was full of broken glass.

“*Non aver paura.*”

The scent of pine was stronger now—almost overpowering.

“Why shouldn’t I be afraid?” Lena cried, almost stumped by the creature’s foreign tongue.

Instead of answering her, the thing approached the helpless teen with upraised talons.

Flattening herself against the wooden headboard of her bed, Lena could only stare in horror. Her heart felt like it was going to burst.

“Nana! Please help me!”

It was a desperate plea by a desperate girl.

Before she fainted, Lena saw the descent of menacing claws and prayed her death would be quick. She barely registered the splintering sound of breaking wood to her left.

DARKNESS.

There was darkness everywhere but not that of the night. There were no shadow puppets to torment Lena now. No, this darkness was deeper. It was of the soul. And it came from clinging to her anguish and sorrow and despair.

Falling.

Lena was falling hopelessly into the abyss, with no end in sight.

“Lena,” a soft voice called, trying to pull her back.

It was like being caught in a fishing net, and she was floundering, unable to breathe.

Lena's eyes shot open as she struggled for air. It did not come naturally, but then she heard a soothing—and hauntingly familiar—nursery rhyme, and her breathing settled.

Nanna cuneta
La mamma è andata a messa
Papà è andato ai campi
Con tre cavalli bianchi
Bianca la sella
Viva Lena bella!

Tears welled up in Lena's eyes.

How can something so beautiful make me want to cry? she thought.

Something else was tugging at her emotional heartstrings, and it wasn't the musical chimes coming from the crib mobile above her head.

Beyond the whirring collection of hand-stitched Care Bears, Lena saw the figure of a woman she'd recognize anywhere.

Nana!

The girl was ecstatic, but instead of squealing with delight, a bubbly, gurgling sound escaped her lips.

Was that me? Lena marveled, surprised at her own alien—but distinctly juvenile—voice.

With amazing dexterity, the woman plucked a Care Wipe with one hand from a nearby Huggies box and gently cleaned the drool trickling down the baby's chin.

The woman—Lena's grandmother—was leaning over one side of the bed where the wooden crib slats were bordered with mesh bumper pads.

Her scent—a mixture of incense fruit and spices, with an underlying hint of pine needles—was gentle and pleasing.

I must be dreaming this, the girl thought—although in her present state, Lena would best be described as an infant.

There were crow's feet around the woman's eyes that were just beginning to take root, and the gray in her dark hair was less prominent than Lena remembered. But despite being overjoyed at seeing her beloved Nana, the girl/child was frightened by her grandmother's distraught appearance.

The woman's face was pale, as pale as a weathered tombstone, and huge tears were streaking down her normally rosy cheeks.

Why is Nana so sad? And why is she dressed all in black? Did somebody die?

"*Mia povera nipotina,*" her grandmother said with a deep sigh. "*Non possiamo incolpare Dio per aver preso tua madre.*"

What? My mother's dead?

"*Nessuno di noi può comprendere il piano perfetto di Dio,*" Nana continued.

Lena had no intention of wanting to understand God's perfect plan.

The woman began to hum nervously—a trait Lena was familiar with, like the irrational shaking of one's foot.

None of this makes sense, Lena thought. *Why am I here*?

Unfortunately, Lena was incapable of asking any questions, so she tried to express her confusion by crossing her eyes.

"Don't be afraid, my little one," her grandmother said, switching to English as if registering the baby's puzzlement. "I will not leave you, orphan."

She produced a stuffed animal from behind her back—

one that Lena was intimately familiar with.

Its thick, brown fur and coal-colored, button eyes brought a smile to the baby's lips.

Nana set the teddy bear on the side table by Lena's crib, as if to watch over the child.

"Even when I am gone," her grandmother said firmly, "you will have a protector."

Understanding seemed to make the baby sleepy, and soon—after Nana began singing her favorite nursery rhyme once more—Lena's eyelids fluttered closed.

SHORTLY AFTER MIDNIGHT, WHEN THE TEEN SHOULD HAVE BEEN ASLEEP, Lena awoke, startled and confused.

In the dim light of her room, surrounded by an alien landscape, Lena felt a twinge of uncertainty.

Sitting up slowly, she watched as playful shadows danced across her room.

Don't be scared, Lena thought. *It's just a trick of the moonlight.*

Lena was long past being spooked by shadows, but she wondered what had roused her in the middle of the night.

There was a phantom pain in her left wrist, and a feeling of déjà vu lingered nearby.

Lena brushed them off. There was no need to waste time on bad memories.

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness, and familiar shapes began to appear. Well-placed keepsakes highlighted Lena's new living quarters.

Rachel, the teen's roommate and closest friend, was snug in her bed in the far corner of the room, snoring softly, but it wasn't this rhythmic noise that had awoken the young university student.

Something's missing, Lena realized and worried she had left something back at her foster home. It was Lena's first night in the girl's dormitory, and most of her unpacking had already been done.

Panic seized her throat when she realized why there was a hole in her chest.

Silently, Lena crept out of bed. Her bare feet barely touched the floor as she raced across the room.

Please be there.

Lena was trembling and close to tears by the time she reached her closet.

The moonlight streaming through her window continued to cast shadows, but the creature on her top shelf was unmistakable.

“Hello,” it seemed to say. “Looking for me?”

Lena almost giggled as she reached for her furry friend. At its touch, she felt a warm glow inside. She hugged the stuffed bear fiercely, and its well-worn fur caressed her cheeks.

Carrying it back to her bunk, Lena placed the teddy bear at the foot of her bed.

As she crawled under the covers, drowsiness took hold of the teen, but before she fell asleep, Lena blew her guardian angel a kiss.

And the bear’s dark, button eyes, now symmetrical, sparkled in the moonlight.

JACK OF SPADES

Kevin M. Folliard

Clark didn't much care for fishing or card games. He thought far less of his mom's boyfriend, Brad. But he agreed to go on the trip to make Mom happy.

After Clark's father died, Mom turned to the bottle, but she kicked the habit. Brad brought it back.

Brad started showing up like clockwork after dinner with beer and wine. Time for Clark and his eleven-year-old sister Carly to do homework—time for Mom and Brad to unwind.

Soon Brad's trashy friends started dropping by the house, too. Bald Larry. The Old Man with the Shaky Jaw. Big Burly Mike. By nine p.m., once Mom was good and toasted, Brad's crew would slip in one-by-one. They'd take over the living room and gamble into the wee hours. Brad and his pals slapped aces, kings, and queens on the coffee table, while Mom slowly passed out, blood-red wine sloshing around her glass.

Once Clark caught Big Burly Mike lurking in the hallway. The six-foot-five-inch giant was fixated in glassy-eyed awe, staring into Carly's bedroom.

Clark started sleeping on the floor of his sister's room, his Louisville Slugger close by.

He tried to talk to Mom about Brad. About the drinking. About leering creeps like Burly Mike.

"I'll take care of it," Mom promised more than once. But always cushioned by, "I'm not wild about Mike, but Brad only wants the best for us."

Brad was a great mechanic, a wiz with computers, good with money, and always "knew a guy" who could cut the family a deal. And Mom was sometimes wild about Burly Mike when it came time to move furniture, fix the water heater, or set up the illegal streaming entertainment box.

Clark spoke little to Brad. He told his sister to stay away from Brad's friends. Once during breakfast, Clark commented on the trashed living room. "If Brad's friends are going to crash our house every night, they should clean up before they go."

Brad glared.

Mom took a long sip of coffee. She massaged her temples and nodded. "Yes, Clarky. They should." The remainder of that breakfast passed in stony silence.

Brad grabbed Clark on his way out the door to school. He squeezed Clark's shoulder so hard it left a bruise. "You may not like me much right now, Clark Kent. But just remember, I've got the key to your momma's heart. I make her happy. That's reason enough for you to be civil."

Clark understood that Brad *didn't* have a key to Mom's heart. He had the magic elixir. And Mom's sober breakfast moments were few and far between. Every time Clark and his sister begged Mom to change, excuses flew from her lips:

"Brad and I are adults. We make our own choices."

"Your job is to go to school and get good grades. My job is to manage this house."

"God forbid I should have some fun."

As the months wore on, it slowly dawned on Clark—Brad wasn't going anywhere. Mom didn't manage the house anymore. And Mom's fun made

them miserable.

At first, Clark refused to go on the fishing trip.

“He wants to bond,” Mom had said. “You can invite Marty. It’ll be fun.”

Clark’s response: “I’d rather gouge an eye out than spend a weekend at Brad and Mike’s rundown cabin.”

And then Mom sobbed. “We’re trying, honey! He’s trying! This is his way of showing us! He’s serious about being a part of this family.”

Tears oozed down her face. “When we lost Dad, I felt like a part of me died with him. Brad makes me feel complete. He helps me so much…I know it’s hard for you to understand…”

And she sobbed and sobbed.

It made Clark sick and ashamed and terrified all at once. He couldn’t stand the guilt.

He agreed to go.

But the part about Brad “being part of the family” curdled his guts like spoiled milk.

Fortunately, his best friend Marty jumped at the opportunity to take a trip. Marty had just finished summer school. There were precious few weeks before the first day of seventh grade. Marty and Clark had been inseparable since first grade, and since Clark’s dad died, Marty had been more like a brother.

On the drive up to Lake Coldwater, Brad blasted heavy metal so loud the boys couldn’t even talk. Only half of Brad’s cigarette smoke made it out the car window.

They spent that entire first day crisping in the sun and dangling worms in murky water. Brad slugged beers while the boys feigned interest in his racist jokes and tales of decades-old college pranks—pranks where people usually ended up in the hospital.

He had just finished a story about how he and his frat pals had greased the handicapped ramp at the university. A professor’s wheelchair had gone skidding into oncoming traffic. Brad threw back his head and roared with laughter. Tears leaked from his eyes. His gold tooth glinted in the midday sun.

“Crimes,” Clark muttered.

“What’s that?” Brad chuckled and stared in confusion.

“Those weren’t pranks, Brad,” Clark said louder. “They were crimes.”

“Nobody died.” He shoved Clark, and the whole boat wobbled. “Jesus. Clark Kent on the case. You got my back, right, elf-ears?”

Marty blushed crimson. His oversized ears were one thing Clark never teased him about. “Yeah, sure.” Marty forced a smile.

“Yikes!” Brad slurped his beer. “Your generation’s got problems.”

By high noon, sweat matted Marty’s sandy bangs under the brim of his White Sox hat. Sunburn tinted his ears bright red. When Brad stood to “bleed the lizard” over the side of the boat, Marty leaned toward Clark and whispered, “You owe me!”

By four p.m., Brad was glass-eyed, red-faced, and slurring a storm of curses as he battled, and finally reeled in, a hefty, large-mouthed bass.

Brad undercooked his fish, but the boys ate hotdogs.

By eight p.m., half a cooler of beers finally caught up to Brad. He passed out in the middle of the one-bedroom cabin. Brad’s snores rumbled like thunder. The boys were left without a cell signal, a TV, or an internet connection to entertain them.

Brad had brought a deck of red-backed Bicycle playing cards—promising Clark that he was going to teach him and his buddy how to play poker—but Clark didn’t know any games.

Marty fanned the deck. A sly smile crossed his face. “Get Brad’s lantern,” he said. “I know how to pass the time.”

With the lantern and two folding chairs in hand, they found a wooded clearing with a large stump, not far from the cabin. Beer cans and scorched earth marked the site of recent bonfires. Trees shivered in cool summer wind.

They sat a chair on either side of the stump and placed the lantern between them. Marty slid the cards from the pack. His hands blurred as he shuffled. “This is gonna sound weird,” Marty said. “But it works.” He split the deck and interspliced them on the wood with a brisk clickity-clack.

Lantern light cast a wobbling shadow behind the deck. Scores of cicadas screeched.

“With this deck of cards, I can tell your future.” Firelight danced in Marty’s green eyes.

Clark burst with laughter.

“Seriously!”

“Marty, you can’t tell the future with regular playing cards. You need special ones that fortune tellers use, with characters like the King of Cups and the Fool and all that dumb stuff.” Clark folded his arms. “And even those cards are bogus.”

“That’s what I thought, too.” Marty held up his index finger. “But I swear, this works! See, my sister told me that all decks of cards are related. Go super far back in history and the number of cards in the deck and what’s printed on the cards changes, but the principle is the same. A deck of cards is just a bunch of possibilities. All cards have, like, a mathematical formula that taps into weird truths.”

Clark rolled his eyes. “B.S.”

“Really! These cards have spades, clubs, diamonds, and hearts. But some decks have wizards or fools or swords or cups. They’re all just standing in for some possibility, and it’s the combination that you’re supposed to read—if you know how to read it.”

“Right. And you know.”

“My sister showed me,” Marty insisted.

An owl hooted. Gnats clustered around the lantern, and Clark shooed them away. “Okay, how does it work?”

“We both focus on whoever’s fortune we’re doing, then I lay two rows of three cards. The first row is numerical—jacks and queens are 11 and 12, ace is one, king is zero. The numbers tell a time. If they don’t fit within 60 minutes you add the second two cards together, red suits are a.m., black suits are p.m.”

Clark rubbed his dark buzzed hair. “Huh?”

“Let’s say I lay out the eight of diamonds, then a two and a four,” Marty explained. “It means whatever we’re predicting happens at 8:24 a.m.”

“That’s pretty specific.”

“Then you keep laying down cards until you have three face cards on top of the time. The suits tell if your fortune is going to be good or bad or something in between. Diamonds are the best, hearts represent positive relationships, clubs are bad relationships, and spades are bigger problems.”

Clark raised an eyebrow. “Bigger problems? Like being stuck at a boring cabin with your mom’s drunk boyfriend?”

Marty ignored him. “For example, a King of Hearts can be your teacher or your boss giving you a good grade or a promotion. The Queen of Clubs

could be like your mom finding out something bad that you did. It's kinda open to interpretation, but it can be spot on."

"Okay, I get what you're doing." Clark tilted his chair back and rested his shoes on the stump. "You're setting me up for some fake fortune. Whatever cards you lay down, you're going to say something horrible is going to happen to try to psych me out."

"I wouldn't do that."

Crickets droned.

"Okay," Marty clarified. "I wouldn't do that about this. This works!"

"Remember when we were eight and you told me you trapped Bigfoot in your garage?"

"This is different—"

"And remember when you told me Megan Walters had a crush on me and I should buy her a Valentine's Day present?"

"You got her a nice present!"

"And remember the time—"

"Clark!" Marty's face grew serious. "Listen. The last time my sister did this with me, it predicted I'd have an opportunity at four forty-five p.m. And you know what happened at exactly four forty-five that very afternoon?"

"Mrs. Doheeny gave you a big wet smooch for your last day of summer school?"

"No. You called my house and invited me on this trip. Exactly at four forty-five."

A daddy-long-legs crept past the lantern, its spindly shadow twirling beside it. The spider crawled over the deck and disappeared down the tree stump.

"Okay, first of all, you're making that up—"

"I swear on my grandpa's grave, Clark! That happened—"

"—Second of all, even if you're telling the truth: coincidence! Your sister got lucky. She psyched you out."

Marty's forehead knit with confusion. Clark could almost hear the gears turning in his friend's head.

The owl unleashed a low who-who-whooo.

"I don't know, man. My sister's boyfriend is into all this spooky stuff. They dress all dark and read these old books. Ever since she met that guy,

strange things have been happening…”

“So you’ve said.” Earlier that summer, Clark had heard about Marty’s sensation that someone—something—in Marty’s house had been lurking. About seances that his older sister’s friends held. Unless those were all just stories leading up to this moment, this perfect prank in the woods.

At least it’s just me and him, Clark thought. *One thing about Marty, he loves a gag, but he doesn’t usually try to humiliate me in front of everyone else.*

“C’mon.” Marty tapped the deck. “What’s the harm in trying?”

Clark stared at the deck’s gelatinous shadow, the gathering gnats. *They’re just cards*, he thought. *Brad brought them, not Marty. So, they’re not rigged.*

“You scared, bro?”

Clark scoffed.

“You have a better idea on how to pass the time? You’re the one who invited me on this trip because you didn’t want to be stuck alone with beer-sluggin-Bradley—you’re welcome by the way. That hotdog tasted like rubber.”

“Yeah, well…” Clark sniffed. “You don’t have to live with him.”

Marty’s eyes widened. “He moved in?”

“Practically.” A mosquito stung Clark’s neck. He slapped it and wiped a purple smudge on his jeans. “My mom always dates dumb guys. Like caveman dumb. It just usually doesn’t last this long.”

Silence hung between them.

“Maybe it will be over soon,” Marty offered.

“She wants him to be part of the family,” Clark said. “She begged me to go fishing with him.”

“Jeeze, I’m sorry.” Marty eyed the vinyl deck of cards, shimmering in the lantern’s glow. “Maybe we can find out how long it’ll last…that way, at least you’ll know.”

Clark glared. Heat rose in his cheeks.

“I wouldn’t pull your leg about this,” Marty said. “I’m not going to try and make a prediction that makes you feel bad about your mom, dude. If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work.”

“All right.” Clark sighed. “Let’s do it.”

Marty shuffled the deck a few more times. “Focus on Brad and his relationship with your mom.”

Clark thought about Brad. Brad swearing at his mom when they were late picking him up from the airport. Brad passing out in the bathroom and shattering the toilet tank’s porcelain lid. Brad terrifying his sister on Halloween by tapping the window wearing a hideous clown mask.

Brad and Burly Mike in the backyard, making Carly fetch their beers.

How Mike had touched his sister’s hair and crooned: “Thanks, angel!”

Clark squeezed his fists. His temples throbbed.

Marty set the deck back down. “Split it.”

Clark set half the cards to one side, and Marty placed the other half on top. Then he quickly flipped three cards in front of Clark, left to right:

10 of Spades

8 of Spades

9 of Spades

“Eight plus nine is seventeen,” Marty said. “This is about tonight. 10:17 p.m.”

Brush rustled around them. The owl whoo’d. Clark’s chest tightened. His stomach sank. His mind circled back to his mom, teary-eyed, begging Clark to let Brad “try.” To let Brad into the family.

Clark didn’t just want Brad out of the family. He wanted him out of their lives.

Marty’s hand hovered over the deck.

“What are you waiting for?” Clark whispered.

“Just wondering. Is it going to happen either way…or do the cards make it happen?” He glanced at his watch. “It’s already 9:53…”

“I knew it!” Clark shouted. “You’re trying to freak me. Jesus, Marty, flip the stupid cards!”

“Okay.” Slowly, Marty placed a card on top of each number:

Joker

Joker

Jack of Spades

Marty drew a shallow breath and sank in his chair.

“What?” Clark shouted. “Why are you acting like this? You said you weren’t going to freak me out!”

“Well.” Marty cleared his throat. “Joker is the Death card.”

Clark studied the twin Jokers, identical motley-clad jesters balanced on unicycles. Their manic grins and wild eyes tilted upward in lunacy.

“Death isn’t always bad,” Marty explained. “Sometimes it just means change.”

“But?”

“But remember, spades are bad, worse than clubs.”

Clark’s eyes shifted to the regal profile of the Jack of Spades, clad in primary colors, a blue eye fixed forward, straw hair curling down his neck. “And Jack?”

“Uh…” Marty shook his head. “I’m not sure what my sister would say. Jacks can be a lot of things, but usually they’re not people. They’re like… forces of nature. Like a storm. A bad thunderstorm?”

“So, it’s going to rain tonight.” Clark threw back his head and laughed at the clear, starry sky. “It’s going to storm at 10:17 tonight. Alert the weatherman!”

“It could be any non-human force,” Marty said. “Bad luck, or some kind of…”

A burning stench filled the air. Both boys’ eyes were drawn to the tree stump. Wisps of smoke coiled from the six cards.

“Get those cards away from the lantern!” Clark reached forward, just as a burst of flame curved across the side of the stump, engulfing the cards in a white-hot moon. Orange cinders swirled. Both boys shouted. Their chairs clattered as they leapt to their feet and backed away.

Almost as quickly as the fire erupted, it shrank and vanished in a sulfurous puff. A gust of wind drifted the smoke into the forest, and glowing cinders lingered in a crescent of soot, where the cards had been.

Jagged lettering remained, etched in neon embers on the surface of the wood: JACK OF SPADES CLAIMS 2!

The embers glowed yellow, then faded into charred wood.

Clark and Marty exchanged terrified glances, then they bolted toward the cabin, tearing through weeds. Branches lashed their arms and faces. They collapsed on the steps to the cabin, breathless, hearts thundering.

“Claims two?” Clark panted. “Claims two, like…like what? Jesus, Marty, I didn’t want Brad to die!”

“It didn’t say Brad,” Marty stuttered. “It just said two.”

“What if it means both Brad and my mom?” Tears welled in Clark’s eyes.

“What if it means the two of us?” Marty hissed. “What if Brad is the Jack of Spades?”

An image flooded Clark’s mind. His mom, curling her arms over Brad’s shoulders after he fixed the kitchen sink. *My hero! My Jack of all Trades!* she’d said before she planted a long, disgusting kiss on his lips.

“Jesus!” Clark paced the front porch. Inside, Brad’s snores rumbled. “Why did you make me do that?”

“I didn’t make you!” Marty checked his watch. “Whatever this means, it happens in fifteen minutes.”

“Okay maybe…maybe it just means the two of them are breaking up, and that’s it.”

“Spades.” Marty shook his head. “Spades are bad. If your mom broke up with Brad, that would be good.”

“Not for Brad, though.” Clark raised a fist at Marty. “I swear, if you set this up, it’s pretty low! Bonus points for crazy special effects and good acting back there, but now’s the part where you confess that you’re messing with me.”

Color drained from Marty’s face. “I’m not.”

Clark grabbed Marty’s t-shirt. “You’re lying!”

Marty wrestled away. “I’m not!”

A thunderous pounding shook the cabin door. “What. The. Ever-loving fuck!” Brad’s muffled shouts slurred. “You kids could wake the dead!” The doorknob turned. Brad appeared, undershirt disheveled. Eyes red, hair mussed with bedhead.

“Sorry, Brad,” Clark said. “We’ll be quiet.”

“Christ!” He looked from boy to boy. “What have you punks been up to?” Brad glared from one boy to the other. A tattoo of a Celtic ring, with a dagger in the center, swelled on his bicep. “You both look like you saw the ghost of Hitler’s Whore.”

Both boys remained silent.

Brad eyed his gunmetal-gray Yeti cooler. “You been sneaking beers? I’d have let you each have one if you just asked. But stealing…that’s another story.”

“We didn’t have any of your beer,” Clark muttered. “You could count them, but I’m not sure you were keeping track.”

“Watch that lip, Clark Kent.” Brad lit a cigarette and leaned against the cabin. “So why are you queers out here screaming at each other?”

“We were playing cards in the woods, and uh…” Marty’s eyes met Clark’s. “An owl swooped down. It scared us.”

Brad chuckled. “What the hell time is it, anyway, Dumbo?”

Marty’s cheeks reddened between his sunburned ears. He glanced at his watch. “10:06.”

“Thank you, Marty.” Brad craned his head toward Clark and let out a stream of gray smoke. “You got a good pal here, Clark. I like him.”

Clark shrugged.

“You yourself have had a chip on your shoulder this whole trip, though.”

Silence hung between them.

“But you always have a chip, don’t you?” Brad grinned. “Does Clark have a chip with you, Marty? Or is it just me?”

“Not sure,” Marty muttered.

Brad puffed. “Maybe crack a smile when I’m around sometimes.”

Clark scowled.

“It breaks your mom’s heart, you know, that you have an attitude about me. I mean, I get it.” Brad flicked orange embers over the edge of the porch. “I hated my mom’s boyfriends, too. It’s sorta your job, isn’t it? But after a guy goes through all the trials, and wins a woman’s heart, there comes a time when her spawn needs to ease up and just let Momma be happy.”

Clark grit his teeth. “What trials did you go through, Brad?”

Brad gave a hard, dazed laugh. “I put up with a lot, shorty. I’m your mom’s errand boy. She holds up a hoop, I jump right through, no questions asked.”

Clark took a deep breath. “Do you love my mom, Brad?”

Brad dragged his cigarette. “What kind of question is that?”

“It’s not a hard question,” Clark said.

“Hey, Clark,” Marty whispered. “Maybe we should go to bed.”

“I love to see your mom happy, kiddo.” Smoke sank over Brad’s stubbled chin. “I think that’s something we both could agree about.”

Marty raised his hand. “Hey, Brad, guys, look…I’m a guest, and I’m not really comfortable with this conversation.”

Brad chuckled. “Part of a gentlemen’s trip is airing grievances, Marty. And it might surprise you, but I’m happy for Clark Kent to get things off his chest. To get that super-chip off his super-shoulders.”

Clark’s face burned with anger.

“Men have to work through stuff,” Brad explained. “That’s how they get past their problems. For example, you boys were out here, screaming about how someone was lying. What was that all about?”

The boys exchanged uneasy glances.

“My buddy Mike and I, when we have a spat, we head down to the gym and go a few rounds. We call it a gentlemen’s dual—”

“Mike is a pervert,” Clark said. “I don’t like him—or any of your friends—hanging around my mom or my sister.”

A smile crossed Brad’s face. Smoke drifted between them.

Clark met Brad’s eyes. “That’s my grievance,” he said. “One of them.”

Marty shrank away, glanced at his watch, and massaged his brow.

“You have more grievances, Clark? What else?”

Clark took a deep breath. “You got my mom drinking again,” he said. “She was clean for a long time.”

Brad shrugged. “Adults drink.”

“Not that much. Not every day.”

“Listen, kid,” Brad drawled. “When your dad died, and you and your sister were littler, I get that your mom had to focus. But you guys can take care of yourselves more now. Your mom is entitled to some fun.”

“You’re poison to her.” Clark stood taller, clenched his fists.

“That’s your opinion.” Brad snuffed the butt of his cigarette on the banister. “I have a grievance, too, Clark Kent.” Brad flicked the cigarette into the dark grass. “I take my girlfriend’s son on a nice, friendly fishing trip. Feed him dinner. Even offer him a beer. And he’s ungrateful.”

“Say you’re sorry,” Marty muttered. “Clark, just say sorry.”

Clark glared.

“Well?” Brad asked. “Are you sorry?”

“Clark,” Marty whispered. “This could be it. You could be causing it.”

“Take your time, Clark.” Brad wandered to the edge of the porch, opened his cooler, and swirled his hand through ice and water for a silver

can.

“Clark.” Marty held his shoulder and whispered, “It’s 10:15! Don’t do it. Don’t piss off the Jack of Spades.”

Clark took a deep controlled breath. Brad returned and cracked his beer open. Carbonation fizzed. Brad chugged like a frat boy, emptying the can. Then he unleashed a satisfied “Aaah,” followed by an ugly, wet belch. He widened his eyes at Clark. “Well?”

“I’m sorry, Brad,” Clark said.

Marty sighed relief.

“I’m sorry my mom ever met you,” Clark continued. “Because you’re ruining her life.”

“Oh Jesus,” Marty whispered.

Brad’s eyes darkened. His calloused fingers crushed the aluminum can. In just one stride, he had Clark by the throat.

Clark choked and struggled.

Brad effortlessly lifted him off his feet and pressed him against the cabin. “What did you say?”

“I said—”

Brad clenched Clark’s windpipe.

Marty pounded Brad’s side. “Let him go! Let him go!”

Without even looking, Brad palmed Marty’s face with his free hand and shoved. Marty collapsed on the deck. “Don’t!” he whimpered. “Please God, don’t kill him!”

Clark struggled for breath. His feet kicked the air. He brought his hands up, desperately trying to pry away Brad’s iron fingers, to relieve the pressure on his throat. *He warned me*! Clark thought. *Marty warned me not to say it! Now Brad’s going to kill me, and to cover it up, he’ll kill Marty, too!*

“Don’t kill him!” Marty cried.

“Shut up, punk!” Brad shouted.

And Mom. Tears burned Clark’s eyes. *He’ll lie to Mom. Say there was some accident.*

“You’re crazy!” Marty screamed. “Help! Somebody, help!”

“Shut your trap,” Brad growled.

And Carly will be alone.

And Marty’s family…

“He’s going to kill us!” Marty’s shrill scream echoed. But the few cabins in sight remained pitch black. And the grim truth sank in: there were no cars parked beside those neighboring cabins anyway.

There hadn’t been other boats on the lake that day.

They were alone.

“Help!” Marty screamed.

“Shut the—” Brad gulped. His eyes twitched. His grip loosened.

Clark twisted free and dropped to his feet. He gasped for air, stumbled, and crawled toward Marty.

Marty grabbed his shoulders. “You okay?”

Clark sucked in precious breaths. “I think so…”

Brad was groaning, gagging. His hands clutched his stomach. Red bile sloshed from his lips and splattered his shirt. His eyes widened in wet surprise.

A narrow object slid from Brad’s belly button to his heart. Blood spilled in a thick column down Brad’s torso. His limbs stiffened, as if they were turning to stone. Bold red lines sliced up and down Brad’s arms and legs.

Some inner force started to pry Brad’s body apart. His skin split. Bones crunched. A tall, spindly figure peeled out of Brad’s chest, slick with blood. The figure twisted like crepe paper, spiraled and spun, shaking the blood free.

The surface of its two-dimensional body gleamed in the cabin light. Long, flat arms and legs bowed free from Brad’s shredded limbs. Blood slid off its body, like grease sliding off a non-stick pan. Primary colors and intricate patterns shone as the blood slipped away.

The being wriggled and writhed. Out popped a head, flat and triangular. It stared in profile: the one-eyed Jack of the playing card!

Brad’s lifeless form collapsed. The Jack stretched flat, wiry limbs. It contorted its ribbon-like form, until its vinyl body was totally clean of its gruesome birth.

The Jack unfurled long papery fingers, clenching and unclenching them as if to test its own movement. Red, blue, yellow, black, and white danced across its vest and belt. As it stretched, angular shapes and colors circled and folded like the maddening patterns of a kaleidoscope. Columns of sharp black spades rolled up its form, gliding and vanishing past its two-dimensional shoulders.

Spiky gold triangles circled its flat, gentlemen's hat. Straw hair swirled into hypnotic curls at the nape of its neck. Gleaming rectangular teeth shone beneath the one-sided spike of its moustache. A hooked nose hung right of its face, and its wild blue eye was alight with malice.

Marty's hand trembled on Clark's shoulder. Clark struggled for words, shouted inside his head for his muscles to move, but he remained spellbound.

The Jack twisted, its body momentarily vanishing on a two-dimensional plane, and for a moment, the boys glimpsed the other half of its profile, searching in the shredded innards of Brad's lifeless husk. It reached deep inside Brad's arm—where the dagger tattoo had been. Papery fingers pulled out a long, flat spear, with a tip twisted like a corkscrew.

"Run," Marty whispered. "Run. Run!" Marty was on his feet now, tugging Clark. Clark snapped to attention. The boys bolted from the porch and rushed between the trees.

Out of the corner of his eye, Clark spotted the Jack's billowing form vaulting over the porch railing, legs bowing in long, sinister strides, like an enormous daddy-long-legs.

He forced himself to look forward.

Marty was only a few steps ahead. The boys raced until they stumbled breathlessly into the clearing with the burned tree stump. Brad's lantern continued to flicker.

"What was that!" Clark grabbed Marty's shoulders.

"I have no idea!"

"Did your sister say anything about a…hideous…playing card creature?"

Marty shook his head.

"That thing is going to claim two! It already got Brad! Marty! It's going to get one of us! What do we do?"

"I don't know." Marty's face was paper-white.

Clark glanced through the woods. A lanky shape wobbled between the trees, like a rubbery cartoon character. "Please!" Clark shouted. "Leave us alone!"

Primary colors gleamed in moonlight. In one spindly fingered hand it twirled its spear.

"Don't hurt us," Clark cried. "Don't hurt my friend. Don't hurt me."

The Jack got closer. It curled around tree trunks, rubbed its chin with curious snaky fingers.

“Brad’s boat,” Clark whispered. “We have to circle around to the pier. As fast as we can. Get out on the water.”

The Jack wiggled its fingers in a hypnotic wave, then it slunk and poked out from behind a closer tree.

“Count of three…” Clark whispered.

The Jack fondled its spear, closer now.

“One…”

The crystal blue eye glinted.

“Two…”

In a split second, the Jack whipped to the right. Its flattened body wriggled like an eel.

“Thr—”

The Jack’s spear skewered the earth right in front of them. Marty tripped over it. Clark turned to help him. The Jack of Spades loomed behind them. Lantern light rippled over its body, turning Jack into a hideous stain-glass window.

The Jack wheeled one tapering arm back and whipped it down. White confetti fingers swirled around Marty’s ankle. Jack’s arm jerked. Clark heard a snap, and Marty screamed in agony.

“No!” Clark dropped by Marty’s side and held out his hands. “Not him! Please don’t take him!”

Jack’s cold eye settled on Clark. It plucked its spear from the ground. He stared from one boy to the other, as if savoring his choice.

He wants one of us, Clark thought. *He needs one of us. I’m the one who hated Brad this much. I’m the one protecting my family.*

Marty whimpered.

“Take me,” Clark said. “Then you’ll have two. Me and Brad.”

“No!” Marty writhed and held his leg. “Someone else. Anyone else! Not us!”

“It has to be me.” Clark’s stomach sank. “If it’s not one of us, who will he take instead? My mom? My sister? Your sister?”

Jack’s flat fingers fanned over both boys. Red lines, golden triangles, and black and white spades folded with vertigo. Its pale face sneered. Flat teeth chattered in mute laughter.

Its arm whirled between them. In a heartbeat, it coiled around Marty like an anaconda. Marty screamed and struggled. Jack's torso squeezed Marty's arms at his sides. With its free hand, it dug its rectangular fingers into Marty's scalp. Then Jack inched the twirling tip of its spear toward Marty's throat.

"Stop!" Clark cried. "Please! You can have me!"

"Help!" Marty screamed. "Help!"

Clark reached for Jack's arm. Sharp pain fired up his palm, and he instantly recoiled. The edges of Jack's body were razor sharp. Blood trickled from Marty's scalp. The tip of Jack's spear drew a bloody red bead from Marty's neck.

Suddenly, yellow headlights blazed. Tires crunched gravel. Jack glanced up, its eyebrow shifting with curiosity.

A car door opened and shut. "Who's out there?" A gruff, familiar voice carried.

Clark's breath caught in his throat. A broad-shouldered figure lumbered through the trees. "That you, Brad? I thought I heard screaming. Are you messing with me?"

The figure drew nearer. Clark could make out a big messy beard and huge lumberjack arms. A long hiss sounded as the man cracked a beer. "I brought reinforcements! Checked on your lady on the way up. That sweet little girl was sleeping like an angel."

Strange calm washed over Clark. He stared Jack straight in the eye.

Marty trembled. Blood trickled down his forehead.

"Hey, Jack." Clark pointed toward the shadowy man. "There's your deuce!"

The Jack of Spades grinned. He uncoiled from Marty and strode past the boys. Clark held Marty. Marty looked down and covered his ears.

But Clark watched.

The winding, flat creature trundled through the dark woods on noiseless legs.

Big Burly Mike screamed and screamed.

THE MORTALITY OF MORRIS MERIDIAN

STEVEN PAJAK

Chapter One

MERRICK STOOD AT THE WINDOW, six stories above ground, looking out at the hospital parking lot. Beyond the glass, rain fell against the ink-black backdrop of the night sky. Below, the arc vapor lamps gloomily lit the parking lot with a sickly yellow hue, which, for some reason, made him think of sour lemonade. This late in the evening, the parking lot was empty save for a black Mercedes Benz, which parked nose to nose with Merrick's blood-red BMW.

A tall figure, dressed in all black and wearing a black fedora, emerged from the Mercedes; he was no more than a blur of movement in the night as he angled through the rain toward the hospital entrance, eighty feet below. Hospital visiting hours ended several hours earlier, at nine that evening.

Grandfather, however, lay dying in the Intensive Care Unit, where there were no such time restrictions for visitors.

Turning away from the rain-silvered windows, Merrick went to his sister, Merrill. She was seated in one of the uncomfortable fabric chairs at Grandfather's side, her delicate feet tucked up under her petite body. Merrick watched her for a moment as she read silently from the book she held in her pale and slender hands; in contrast, Grandfather's hands—large, strong, rugged, and creased by age and hard work—made her own look like those of a small child, though she was a woman of twenty.

Merrick, the older of the twins by three long minutes, placed his hand on his sister's shoulder and bent slightly to kiss the top of her head. When she turned to look up at him, he knew there would be tears in her eyes, and, of course, he was right. Her eyes, which were the pale blue of robin's eggs, were damp, red-rimmed.

She'd cried on and off since the day Grandfather had summoned them to his study—four months ago to the day—to tell them of the cancer that now consumed him. Merrill had always been the sensitive one and was most comfortable wearing her emotions on her sleeve.

Merrick remembered a time, when he was much younger, that he once shared her sentimentality. As the man of the house now, he needed to remain strong—keep a stiff upper lip in all situations and give the appearance of complete self-control and confidence always.

"I'm afraid he won't last the night," Merrill said. Her voice cracked, overwhelmed with a flood of emotions. "The doctor said he wouldn't, but I don't want to believe that, Merrick. It can't be Grandfather's time. Not yet."

"Grandfather has lived a long life," Merrick said, his voice even, emotionless. He was trying to be strong for his sister, though it was difficult. The man lying on the hospital bed was his whole world; within hours, he would be gone forever. "Grandfather made his peace with dying. He's ready to face whatever's on the other side. You know that. He told us."

"But *I'm* not ready. I don't want him to die. He's all we have left. How do we go on without him?"

"We still have each other. We've always had each other. As to how we'll go on? We'll honor Grandfather's wishes and live the lives he wanted for us. You'll finish medical school and become a doctor, raise a family."

“And you’ll finish your MBA and run the family business,” Merrill said, the corners of her mouth turning up briefly. “You’ll continue to grow it and expand our fortunes, just as Grandfather envisioned.”

“That’s right. That’s how we honor Grandfather, and that’s how we go on.” He put one hand on her shoulder and gave a reassuring squeeze.

She marked her place in the book and set it down on the nightstand. She stood beside her brother. Together, both twins looked down at their grandfather, or rather, the shell of the man he once was. Charismatic, charming, kind; these were all words anyone who knew him used to describe him. Before the cancer, Morris Meridian had been large in stature, and in Merrill’s memory, his larger-than-life persona matched his size.

Closing her eyes, she pictured him as he was then, when she was a young child—before their parents died and before she and Merrill moved into his estate. Grandmother and Grandfather came for them every Sunday morning, rain or shine. They worshipped at church and then took a late breakfast—Merrill’s favorite was the International House of Pancakes—before bringing them back home to Mother and Father.

Merrill remembered standing at the end of the driveway, eagerly watching Grandfather’s Mercedes climb the hill. She would run to him then, as Grandfather stepped out of his Mercedes Benz, tall and strong, wearing a charcoal gray suit and fedora. He would bend down to swoop her up into his strong arms, then twirl her around before hugging her tightly against his shoulder. He always smelled of peppermint and after-shave—even now, her memory was so vivid that she thought she could smell both.

That moment, captured forever in her mind, was how she always wanted to remember him, tall and strong, able to lift her high above him, yet…the man on the bed before her was shriveled and frail, a husk that held her grandfather’s soul and spirit, but not his vitality.

His whole body was frighteningly thin now. The cancer had eaten Grandfather away, down to the bone. The tubes and wires and machines were like a tangle of vines that had claimed him, but they were all that kept him alive. The flame of life that once burned in his eyes so brightly seemed to fade every day. Today, that flame was barely a spark.

“We have to stay with him tonight,” Merrill said. She looked at her brother, her eyes imploring. “He won’t make it through the night, and I

don’t want him to be alone when he passes. I couldn’t bear the guilt if he were alone in the end. Please, we must stay.”

Merrick knew his sister—and the doctors—were right; Grandfather would not survive another sunrise. In the months since Grandfather first shared the awful diagnosis, Merrick couldn’t help but notice the man’s steady physical decline. The rapid weight loss was most notable. At Grandfather’s request, Merrick arranged to have the family’s personal tailor attend to Grandfather’s suits regularly, to keep up with his shrinking body. Soon after the dramatic weight loss, all things, even the simplest of movements, winded Grandfather. He looked exhausted, even upon first waking in the morning. His skin appeared waxy and his eyes were sunken so far in that his face resembled a skull. His organs were shutting down, one by one, and in the next several hours, so would his heart.

Merrick did not want Grandfather to be alone in his last moments, either, no more than Merrill. What she didn’t understand, though, was that he did not want his sister to live with the memory of watching as Grandfather drew his last breath. They’d been watching him die for months, and Merrick could not bear it any longer.

But there was no point in arguing, not when Merrill had that look in her eye. Though she could easily become emotional, she also had a stubborn streak in her, and once she set her mind on something, she would not back down or quit until she got what she wanted.

“Of course,” Merrick said. “We’ll stay with him tonight.”

Merrill hugged him. “Thank you.”

After a moment, Merrick took his sister’s hand. “Let’s take a break, though. I need some coffee, and you could use a tea.”

An indecisive look flashed across her face.

“But what if…”

“Don’t even think it.” Secretly, he hoped when Grandfather passed, it would happen when they were out of the room. It would be hard for Merrill right now, but would be much easier later, if she were spared that horrible moment when Grandfather gave up his last breath.

Merrill lingered a moment longer, peering somberly at her grandfather, before she finally relented.

Together, the twins left Grandfather’s room and passed the nurses’ station on the way to the elevators. Melody, the nurse currently on duty

looked fixedly at her computer screen and failed to notice the twins as they passed. Nor did she spy the tall young man dressed in all black, with thick wavy hair, and piercing green eyes, as he glided across the cool tiled floor, stopping at the threshold of Grandfather's room. For a long moment, he stood there, looking inside before he finally entered.

Chapter Two

FREDERICK HARRISON, THE YOUNG MAN IN BLACK, STOOD AT THE threshold of the room and stared intently at the withered man lying upon the bed among the jumble of wires and tubes. He was almost unrecognizable after all these years, not only because of the decades that had passed since he last saw his friend, but also because the cancer had eaten the man down.

In the withered face of this man, Harrison could no longer find traces of the Morris Meridian he once knew. Nevertheless, this was Morrie. This was the man who saved him so long ago.

A pang of guilt settled upon Harrison, a sensation of weight pressing uncomfortably against his chest as he floated to the bed, the soles of his fine Italian leather shoes hovering less than an inch above the cold, vinyl flooring. One trembling, pale hand reached out and touched Morrie's gaunt shoulder, which felt like bone rather than firm flesh and muscle. It was upon this once broad shoulder that Morrie had long ago carried Harrison from the field of battle. That was more than half a century ago, but to Harrison, it seemed like just yesterday.

"I am so sorry to see you like this, my friend," Harrison whispered.

Morrie stirred upon the bed, as though he'd heard the words deep down in his slumber, and for the first time in three days opened his eyes. For a moment, Harrison saw only confusion and fear on his friend's countenance, the look of a man who'd woken from a horrible nightmare to find himself in unfamiliar surroundings, with no recollection how he'd gotten there. Then Morrie's eyes settled more fully upon him, a mere flicker of recognition sparking in them.

"Hello, Morris." Harrison leaned slightly forward so that the man could see him more clearly.

Morrie tried to raise his left hand but immediately gave up. He said, “I…I knew you once…a long time…” before he quickly trailed off. His voice was barely a whisper, but Harrison could hear him as clearly as if the old man were shouting. Again, after a moment of clarity in his old eyes, Morrie asked, “Have I expired?”

Harrison laughed gently from deep within his belly. He continued to be inspired by the man’s humor. “No, you are still of this world, my friend. At least for a short while. Much longer if you wish.”

Morrie slowly turned his head right, then left, as though looking for someone or something. He swallowed dryly and with visible pain. With great effort, he whispered, “Water.”

“Of course.”

Harrison retrieved a plastic cup of ice water from the bedside table and maneuvered the flexible straw between Morrie’s dry, cracked lips. As Harrison watched, his old friend sipped greedily from the straw, his throat working to swallow the refreshing liquid.

Harrison licked his own lips, struggling to remember what it was like to feel pain or thirst. He took the cup away after a few more sips and set it back on the bedside table.

“There now. Did that quench your thirst, old friend?”

“Thank you,” Morrie whispered, his voice less a croak now after drinking the cold water. His lids were heavy, and his eyes closed for several seconds before they sprung open again. “I knew you…” He trailed off, trying to recall the memory that danced at the edges of his mind, just beyond his grasp.

“You did, my friend. A very long time ago, in a place far from here. Do you remember?”

Morrie stared back at him with blank eyes. “I…I think…”

“Let me help you remember.”

Harrison reached out with his right hand, the first two of his long, slim fingers pressed against Morrie’s left temple. “It was a bright and calm Tuesday in July of 1944,” Harrison whispered, his lips like butterfly wings, brushing against the old man’s ear. “But it did not end that way. Not for me and certainly not for you.”

Chapter Three

THE MORNING WAS CLEAR AND WARM. A SOFT BREEZE WAFTED OVER THE men, bending the long stalks of grass as they crossed the vast stretch of open fields between the hedgerows. Spread out as far as the eye could see, the men of Charlie Company, and the rest of the 175th Infantry, made their way toward the next row of trees to the north. Tanks and Jeeps interspersed among them, the harsh sounds of their engines and tracks comforting to the men, who somehow felt less exposed by their company.

Morrie carried his M1 Garand at the ready, watching Private Andy Melnikoff, who scouted ahead of the squad. Andy was tall and lanky, and even when crouched, he looked like a normal fellow walking erect. His helmet hid a thick shock of blond hair, and he had eyes so blue you couldn't help but think of the clearest sky you'd ever seen.

One moment, Andy was fifteen yards in front of Morrie, walking in that funny way he had—with his chest forward and his butt sticking out, so he looked off balance all the time—and the next, his body was flying through the air, limbs all akimbo like a ragdoll, struck by an enemy mortar. Suddenly, the quiet morning was rent by the sounds of enemy mortars exploding and the distinctive zipper-like sound of German MG 34 and MG 42 machine guns, as the enemy opened fire on them.

Morrie's knees suddenly buckled and he dropped down onto the ground in fear, down below the line of sight and hot lead.

"Christ!" he shouted, throwing his arms over his helmet and tucking his neck into his shoulders. He could not hear his own voice over the volley of explosions and small-arms fire. The tall grass bent and shredded as bullets flew overhead, driving him lower still, until he was flat on his belly, his nose in the soil. It was cool and damp against his flesh, and he found himself wishing he could dig himself farther into the soil, tunnel down into the middle of the earth where the bullets could not find him.

More explosions rocked the ground—Morrie felt the soil beneath him tremor—as the enemy mortar rounds impacted the earth in intervals nearby. For what seemed like several long minutes, the explosions and gunfire drowned out everything, but then he realized he was hearing the screams of men, crying out in fear and pain. He wished he could plug his ears.

Somehow, above the screaming voices and the horrendous mortar barrage, he heard Sergeant Coley shouting at them, “Get down! Hit the deck and stay low, for Christ sake!”

Lifting his head several inches, Morrie saw men running helter-skelter, scattering for the hedgerow ahead of them, and seeking shelter from hot German lead. He watched in horror as those caught out in the fields were, instead, chewed up by enemy machine guns, which were set up with interlocking fields of fire. He knew they couldn’t go back to the previous hedgerow because it was too far, and they couldn’t go forward because they were under heavy fire. They were pinned down with nowhere to go.

Morrie crossed himself, closed his eyes, and started to recite the Lord’s Prayer, like his mother taught him to do each night before he lay in bed. All around him, the sounds of war rose to a crescendo. Mortars exploded in front, behind, all around, showering him with fragments of cool dark earth, clumps of burning grass, and sometimes sprays of blood and skin. Tracer rounds cut through the air just inches above him. The sounds unnerved him, but none more than the continued screams of dying men that could be heard above the din. Though mostly unintelligible, he somehow knew that they all called out for their mothers with their last breaths.

Sergeant Coley suddenly slammed down beside Morrie, his dark piercing eyes penetrating the other man’s fear. Morrie, like the rest of the men in 3rd Platoon, feared Sergeant Coley. He was a stocky man, with a wrestler’s physique: bold, broad shoulders, strong core, and hands that looked like they could crush coconuts. His gravelly voice sent shivers down their spines, and when he shouted, men jumped to his orders, as though they’d been jabbed with hot pokers.

“Meridian, get me some goddamn support to take out the goddamn Kraut machine guns! They’re eating us alive out here!”

Morrie cringed and threw his arms over his helmet again, as another mortar impacted just several yards to their left. Large chunks of dirt and grass pelted them. He clutched his M1 closer to his body and looked up at Coley through squinted eyes. “I don’t have a radio, Sergeant! I think Hendrickson is comms!”

On one knee now, Coley shouldered his Thompson submachine gun and shouted, “Krauts in the open! Fire, fire, fire!” and emptied the entire magazine, firing all twenty rounds in quick succession. He dropped the

empty magazine and pulled a fresh one from his bandolier. While he loaded it into his submachine gun, he shouted, “I don’t care who has the goddamn radio, just get us some tank support! We’re sitting ducks out here. We’re all gonna die if we don’t take out those goddamn Kraut machine guns!”

“Yes, Sergeant!”

Finding their damn radioman was the last thing Morrie wanted to do right now, but Sergeant Coley didn’t have to tell him twice. On his belly, he crawled south, back toward the rear where he last remembered seeing Hendrickson at muster. Behind him, Coley continued to pop off rounds at German soldiers as they appeared out in the open.

As he crawled, Morrie started to hear American small arms firing as the rest of the 175th started to return fire. Men were moving forward now, as the officers and noncoms started to organize counterassaults on the enemy guns. After crawling twenty yards, Morrie risked looking around. He wasn’t going to find Hendrickson with his head inches from the ground.

Men continued to move forward, running crouched over, zigzagging to make harder targets for the Germans. Morrie could also see the bodies of the fallen that dotted the open field, and his stomach churned at the horrific sight. Some had been fatally shot or had taken direct mortar hits and died where they lay. The others, the not so lucky ones, lay screaming in pain among pools of blood and torn limbs, while medics tried to save them.

On Morrie’s left, two tanks sped forward toward their objectives, pulling his attention away from the dead and dying. A small group of infantry men rode on the back deck of the tanks, hanging on as best they could to the speeding hunk of armor. A bunch of boys from 2nd Platoon fell in line behind the tank, using it for cover as they advanced across the field.

One of the Sherman Jumbo tanks, the one farthest to the left, suddenly came to a halt, the soldiers hopping off as it raised its main gun and fired a 75mm round into a copse of thick hedgerow. The infantry men moved in under cover of the mounted .30 and .50 caliber machine guns fired from both tanks, raining their hot bullets onto the German machinegun positions, shredding the hedgerow, tearing up the ground around them like an enormous rototiller.

“Move up, Private!” an officer yelled at Morrie.

The lieutenant looked like a kid that just graduated high school. His thin face was pocked with acne scars, and his voice sounded as though he’d not

yet reached puberty. He clutched his M1 Carbine in one hand and grabbed Morrie's blouse sleeve with the other. "We're assaulting, Private. Move up!"

"Sergeant Coley sent me to find a radio to call in support on the Kraut guns, sir!"

"What do you think these tanks are for, Private? Now get moving, soldier, and kill some damn Krauts! You're with me, son."

"Yes, sir," Morrie said and reluctantly fell in behind the lieutenant.

To their front, the remainder of Charlie Company and Able Company were moving up in force; the Sherman tanks and infantry managed to knock out the German gunners on the flanks, opening the field and allowing them to advance to the next hedgerow.

A few minutes later, Morrie reconnected with his squad and fell in beside Sergeant Coley. The sergeant's face and hands were streaked with dirt and what might have been blood. He took a drag of his cigarette and let out a cloud of smoke. He looked exhausted already, and the battle had just started. Without looking at Morrie, Coley said, "Good job getting those tanks, kid. We almost lost our asses back there."

Morrie said nothing. He marched on, slowly falling back in formation, until Coley was several yards in front of him. The men were quiet again, at least for the next twenty minutes, before they approached the next hedgerow and the German machine guns opened on them again.

Chapter Four

THE BATTLE RAGED DEEP INTO THE NIGHT, UNTIL BOTH SIDES WERE BATTLE-weary and exhausted, and the sun finally gave way to darkness. The day lasted an eternity; during the summer in France, it didn't grow dark until ten o'clock, and neither side was willing to give up the fight until daylight finally faded.

As the long day wore on, each hedgerow had grown harder to take than the previous one. The Germans fought ferociously the closer the Americans got to their lines. As the Americans moved into assaulting range of each new hedgerow, the Germans would lay down their crossing fields of fire,

their devastating machine guns tearing up those in the lead. The Americans would get pinned down, then call for support from tanks—once they even managed to get air support—to take out the enemy positions. Once the MGs were taken out, they'd advance to the next hedgerow. The displaced Germans who lost the current position would retreat one or two hedgerows back where they would prepare that position, waiting for the next advance by the American forces, each time better prepared.

Under cover of darkness, Charlie Company dug in near the southern end of the hedgerow, which butted up against the base of Hill 192, their objective. Located just northeast of St Lô, Hill 192 could not be classified as a hill on most maps. However, its height of 192 meters gave the Germans an uninterrupted view of the north and west, overlooking the American 2nd Division's lines and all paths that would have to be used for the American 29th Division to attack and capture the town. It was an important position for the Germans, and tomorrow Morrie's company could expect a fierce counterattack as the Germans attempted to retake the hill.

But for now, the night was hot and quiet. Morrie dug his foxhole to the far rear, several yards behind Private Jimmy Orzo and Corporal Ronald Sebree, which was about as far away from Sergeant Coley as he could get. He'd been avoiding Coley the whole day, concerned the man would credit him again for calling in the tank support, which he hadn't. He was also worried because he hadn't seen Hendrickson since the action started sixteen hours ago, so he didn't have a chance to beg Hendrickson to cover for him if Sergeant Coley asked him questions.

Exhausted, Morrie collapsed into his hole, and immediately he could feel every small ache and pain from his head down to his toes. His back and feet were especially sore. The damn heat was horrible. Morrie never sweated as much in his whole life as now, at this very moment. His blouse was drenched with sweat, but he wouldn't remove it for fear of getting chewed out by Coley. The mosquitos were relentless earlier in the evening, but thank goodness, they seemed to finally taper off in the last twenty minutes.

After a few minutes of lying around in the luxurious foxhole, Morrie reached for his canteen and shook it. About an inch of water sloshed around in the battered metal container. He unscrewed the lid, let it dangle by the small chain that secured it to the neck, and upended the canteen, drinking

down the last of the piss-warm water, holding the canteen over his mouth until the last drops fell onto his parched tongue. He was still thirsty, and at the same time, he felt the dull pressure in his bladder that told him he needed to relieve himself.

Grabbing his M1, Morrie slowly started to pull himself out of his hole, when he heard footsteps approaching. He froze, half-in and half-out, listening intently. His first thought was that a German patrol lost its way in the night and had unknowingly crossed into the American lines.

He slid back into his hole and set the M1 on the ridge, aiming in the direction of the sound, ready to open fire at the first sign of the enemy. Instead of Krauts, out of the darkness, Sergeant Coley emerged. He strode out of the shadows like a bull and stood over Morrie, looking down at him.

Morrie let out his breath in a long, shaky sigh, not realizing he'd been holding it the whole time. His shoulders sagged with relief but quickly tensed again when he looked up at Coley. From his perspective in the foxhole, Sergeant Coley appeared much taller and even more menacing than usual. And he didn't look happy, although he never did.

"Meridian, where the hell is Hendrickson?" Coley held his Thompson loosely in his right hand. His other hand rested on the butt of the Colt 1911 he carried in a tanker's holster across his barrel chest. Whether or not he did that consciously to intimidate the men, Morrie couldn't be sure, but it was damn effective.

"I don't know, Sergeant," Morrie said. He could feel fear rise in his stomach, like burning acid. It was not wise to lie to Sergeant Coley. The man was a human lie detector. He could smell bullshit from a mile away.

"You were the last to see him, weren't you?"

Morrie swallowed hard. "I can't say for sure, Sergeant. Last time I saw him was this morning." This was true enough. Morrie saw Hendrickson during their muster, just before the assault started.

"And after he called in tank support?" Coley's voice sounded like it was scorched by cigar smoke and stewed in twenty-year-old bourbon. Or like he'd even swallowed some rusty nails.

Morrie lied, "A lieutenant stopped him for a fire mission, and after that, I lost track of him."

The acid in his stomach rose into his throat as Coley's dark eyes fixed on him, seemed to pin him down against the cool earth of his foxhole. It felt

like the man was staring down into his soul. After a few uncomfortable moments, Coley finally looked away, out into the dark hedgerow beyond. He stared so long into the tangle of trees that Morrie thought the man saw something out there. That lost German patrol.

Suddenly, as if coming out of a trance, Coley shook his head. With his free hand, he un-slung his canteen and tossed it down into the hole, where it clattered, empty, next to Morrie.

“Fill that up. I hear running water somewhere in that direction,” Coley said, indicating the tangle of trees. “Sounds close by. If the stream is good, tell Corporal Sebree to help you fill the rest of the squad’s canteens. We may not see fresh water tomorrow.”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

In an instant, he was out of the foxhole, the aches and pains in his back and neck at once forgotten. He’d dance a jig on his burning heels if it meant getting away from Coley.

He tucked his own canteen into the canvas sheath on his belt and scooped up Sergeant Coley’s. He took a few steps in the direction of the woods where Coley indicated before he remembered his M1 and had to go back to grab it. A flush of heat rose in his cheeks when Coley stared at him and shook his head in disgust.

“Maintain noise discipline, Meridian. And for God’s sake, keep your eyes open. The Krauts are out there, too, and they ain’t all sleeping. Just get the water and haul ass back here. Don’t make me come looking for you.”

He stood there like a statue, holding the canteen and his rifle, until Sergeant Coley turned and disappeared into the night. He looked again in the direction where Coley indicated he’d heard running water. The tangle of trees was thick and dark. Lots of places for German soldiers to hide.

Suddenly, Morrie thought he had found something that he feared more than Sergeant Coley. Later, Morrie would know real fear, the kind of fear that would send even Sergeant Coley running and crying out for his mother.

Chapter Five

MORRIE STUMBLED THROUGH THE DARKNESS FOR MORE THAN TWENTY minutes—certain that each rustle of leaves and cracking of branch underfoot announced his position to the Germans—before he finally reached the source of water: a small trickle of stream that ran down the southern face of Hill 192 and pooled at its base in a small clearing. He'd almost missed it in the shadows of the hill.

He dropped onto his knees beside the stream, set down his M1 beside him on the bank, and dipped his hands into the cold water, splashing his sweaty face and gasping at the coldness. He removed his helmet and ran his wet hands through his greasy hair. The cold water felt refreshing against his hot scalp and the nape of his bug-bitten neck. He closed his eyes, savoring the moment.

In the pale light of the moon, the water looked clear; he could see the blond sandy bottom. He took a taste from his cupped hands. It tasted fresh, and it cooled his parched throat. He scooped the water greedily, drinking it up as fast as he could, getting more on his fatigues than down his dry gullet.

When his belly was full—he felt a dull ache in his abdomen like when he had to let out gas—he lay back, his elbow resting against the clay ground. He looked up into the night sky, taking in the stars high above the French countryside. For the first time that day, Morrie felt a peace fall over him. A light breeze struck up as he pulled off his boots and socks so that he could rest his burning feet in the stream.

Soon, he closed his eyes; he'd forgotten about the frightening sounds of snapping twigs and imagined rogue German patrols, and in minutes he was asleep. His slumber lasted only a few minutes, though, before he jerked awake, heart pounding in his chest and breath caught in his throat. Something splashed in the water just to his right.

Morrie sat bolt upright, snatching his feet out of the cool stream. At first, he thought he'd been dreaming, but he saw the ripple of concentric circles fading outward, like when you dropped a stone into a pond. He reached for his M1 and pushed up onto his knees, and then he stood, crouched over, turning slowly in all directions. His ears listened intently for any sound that would betray his stalker.

He jumped when another object struck the water, just to his left. He almost yelped but somehow managed to choke down the sound. He turned quickly and saw several inches of a fallen branch jutting up out of the water,

the concentric circles rippling out away from its center. Morrie's shoulders sagged with relief. A branch had fallen from one of the tree boughs that extended over the stream. Nothing ominous was out there.

Feeling silly for letting his imagination run away, Morrie set about the task of filling the canteens with water. He'd lost track of time, and Sergeant Coley was sure to give him hell when he got back. Picking up the sergeant's canteen, Morrie unscrewed the top, then dipped it down into the water, watching as air bubbles rose to the surface and the cold stream water occupied the space inside the metal container. When it was full, he started to tighten the cap, then paused when he heard the voice call out.

"Help me, please." It was a harsh whisper, barely audible above the sound of the thin stream.

Morrie dropped the canteen—it hit the edge of the clay embankment before splashing into the stream, where it landed on its side—and grabbed the M1. He pointed the rifle in the direction of the voice, which seemed to come from just the other side of the stream. Still barefoot, Morrie crossed the stream, which was no deeper than two feet at its middle, and paused on the opposite bank.

"Please, help," the voice whispered again, much closer than he expected.

Frozen at the bank, Morrie felt sweat trickling down the back of his neck. His pulse thrummed loudly in his ears, and fear coiled deep in the pit of his stomach, pulling it into knots. Suddenly, he couldn't swallow; his throat was too dry.

"Orion," Morrie croaked the sign of the day.

There was a long pause and his finger slid over the trigger and he slowly started to apply pressure. He held his breath. His heart continued to beat rapidly; the thrumming of his pulse in his ears grew louder and made him feel nauseous. His hands began to tremble with anticipation.

"Mintaka," the weak voice finally responded with the correct countersign. "Mintaka."

Morrie let out his breath in a harsh sigh. He slung the rifle over his shoulder and rushed forward, into the brush where he saw the man lying on his side. He was tall—though not Andy Melnikoff tall—with thick black hair that stuck up in all directions. His blouse and pants were torn in several

places, from shrapnel. One of his knees looked mangled, and Morrie thought he saw bone sticking out through the flesh.

“You’re going to be all right, pal,” Morrie said, kneeling next to the injured soldier. “I’m going to go get some help. Just sit tight and I’ll be back in a jiff.”

“No,” the man said. “Don’t leave me.”

He grabbed Morrie’s arm—he looked as though he should have been dead, but his grip was like iron, and Morrie could not pull away—and tried to sit up but couldn’t. He lay back again, on his side, and propped himself on his right elbow so that he could look at Morrie.

“There’s German patrols all around. I can hear them, just beyond that copse of trees. If you leave me, they’ll find me. They’ll punch my ticket.”

Morrie’s eyes followed as the man indicated the trees behind him. Although straining eyes and ears, Morrie neither heard nor saw anything back there. The moonlight did not penetrate the darkness there though, and only more cool shadows formed beyond more than fifteen or twenty feet.

“I don’t see anyone.”

“They’re there.”

The man tried to sit up again, but Morrie stopped him.

“Whoa, buddy, just lay still. We don’t know how badly you’re hurt.”

“My back,” the wounded soldier said, trying once again to sit up. “There’s something in my back. You have to get it out.”

Morrie moved around the man—who finally let go of his wrist—to examine his back. The entire back of the blouse was torn to shreds. His back was a bloody mess, full of shrapnel shards, some still poking out of his flesh, most probably penetrated deep within. Several inches of a tree branch, about as thick around as Morrie’s finger, jutted out from his lower back, near his kidney. The man obviously went a round with a German grenade and lost.

“This is really bad, pal,” Morrie said, sucking in his breath and gritting his teeth. He hadn’t seen wounds like this so close and personal.

“You need to take the wood out,” the man said. He tried to turn and face Morrie, but the motion caused him pain. “You need to take it out now!”

“I’m not a medic. I don’t know what to do for you. You need serious help, pal.” Morrie stood, adjusting his rifle on his shoulder. He came around so that he could face the man. “I’ll come back for you; I promise.”

“Come,” the man said and motioned with his hand, beckoning Morrie closer. Down on his knees again, Morrie looked at the man, noticing for the first time that the man had beautiful green eyes, a shade he’d never seen before. It was as though he were looking at two rare emeralds. When the man spoke again, Morrie heard him, but he continued to focus on the other man’s eyes; he couldn’t look away even if he wanted to.

“What’s your name?”

“Morris Meridian.”

“It’s too dangerous to go back to our lines right now, Morris. There are Germans out there. You may not be able to hear them, but I can.”

“Too dangerous right now,” Morrie mumbled. The man’s eyes seemed to sparkle, like jewels twinkling in sunlight.

“You need to help me with my wounds, or I will die,” the man said, his voice but a whisper, like a cool breeze on the warm summer night.

“If I don’t help, you’ll die,” Morrie repeated. The emeralds continued to sparkle, as though beneath subtle waves of water.

“That’s right. There’s a cave, just beyond the clearing. We’ll be safe there from German patrols.”

“We’ll be safe in the cave.”

“Help me up, Morris,” the man said and offered Morrie his left hand. With Morrie’s help, the man got slowly to his feet. With his arm around Morrie’s neck, so that Morrie could support him with his shoulder, and with their faces just inches apart, the man said, “Just this way, about thirty feet ahead.”

Together the men walked toward the base of the hill, following the stream on their left, which turned slightly to the north as it pooled into a small spring, where water flowed gently down over a small overhang, about seven or eight feet above ground. After traversing several yards, they halted in the shadows. For a moment, they stood there, the man waiting for Morrie’s eyes to adjust to the darkness.

“Do you see it, Morris?” the man asked, indicating the large crevasse. From here, it appeared just a crack, but Morrie saw it nevertheless and nodded his head. They continued forward, the crack growing larger as they approached. At its base, it was about three feet wide, tapering to no more than a foot across, as it reached its apex, about eight feet up.

Morrie had to turn sideways to enter, following as the man led him inside. It was pitch black after only several feet beyond the entrance, and Morrie felt a sudden sense of vertigo as he was led even deeper into the cavern. Although he couldn't see, he felt as though the cavern had suddenly opened beneath them, above them, all around them; he felt as though he were suddenly afloat in space. He halted and reached out blindly, grasping for stone, anything solid, something to hold onto.

"Be calm, Morris." The man's hand now rested on Morrie's shoulder, grounding him.

Suddenly, Morrie no longer felt as though he were floating or falling. He could feel the cold, solid earth beneath his bare feet.

"Kneel down here."

In the darkness, Morrie knelt and felt an immediate sense of satisfaction when he touched the hard earth beneath him. He dug his fingers into the hard-packed soil and then let it fall through his fingers. He unslung his rifle —everything felt so foreign and strange when you could not see—and set it down beside him, keeping his hand on it so he would not lose it in the dark.

"Do you have a flashlight, Morris?"

"I left it in my ruck, back at my foxhole," Morrie said, feeling immediate sadness at his lack of preparedness.

"One moment, Morris, while I get us a fire, so that you can see."

"Wait!" Morrie shouted; sudden panic overwhelmed him when he felt the man pull away. "Don't leave me here."

"I won't leave you, Morris. Just let me build a fire so that you can see, and all will be well."

The man's words soothed him, and the panic faded as quickly as it had arrived. In the darkness, Morrie sat motionless and listened. The man made almost no sound when he moved; it was as though he was floating above the hard ground, though that was just Morrie's mind playing tricks on him.

After a few moments, Morrie started to wonder if the man had wandered off in the darkness and gotten lost, but then he heard what sounded like deer antlers rattling together. It reminded Morrie of the time when he saw two bucks fighting when he was a young boy, living in Wisconsin. In the darkness, he could not judge the distance of the sound; he couldn't tell if the man was just feet or yards away.

Now, he was aware of the sound of water for the first time since entering the cave. The sound reminded him of when he and his father walked along the beach at Lake Michigan. He came across a conch shell and held it to his ear, convinced by his father that he could hear the lake if he listened carefully enough. That sound was more like wind rushing through a tunnel than water cresting against the shore. What he heard now must be the waterfall that fed the stream where he tried to fill the canteens—a few minutes ago, or had it been longer?

More silence for an unknown time, then Morrie heard a distinctly familiar sound: the cap of a Zippo lighter flipping open. The grit of the flint against the wheel and the spark that ignited the wick proved him right. The sudden appearance of light in the sea of darkness was welcome.

In the little light that the Zippo provided, Morrie now saw that the man was just several feet away from him. Three thick branches were stacked lengthwise, like a makeshift teepee, and the man played the Zippo over a piece of cloth—torn from his tattered shirt—to get the fire going. When it finally caught, the small fire illuminated a six- or seven-foot radius, enough to see that they'd traveled just a short distance from the opening. In his mind, it had seemed much greater.

Chapter Six

TIME SEEMED TO STAND STILL IN THE CAVE. MORRIE HAD NO IDEA HOW long he'd been at it, pulling pieces of stone and wood from the man's back. His hands were starting to cramp around the tweezers. The fire was faded, and with it, the light by which he diligently worked. His eyes were only now growing used to the flicker of fire and the strange shadows the flames cast upon the stone walls all around him.

Using his saturated and stained kerchief, Morrie wiped more blood away, so that he could see the tears in the other man's flesh, where he would probe with the sharp end of the tweezers, digging for his prize. He was worried about his patient, who had grown quiet and pale the last several minutes. Morrie thought he much preferred the grunts and occasional howls

of pain his awkward probing caused as he pulled out the larger shards of wood. At least he knew the man was alive.

“I think I got them all,” Morrie said, wiping sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his blouse. Such a small fire couldn’t throw off such heat, yet he felt feverish. He took off his blouse, which was now damp with his own sweat, and set it aside.

The man sat up slowly and with great care. He flicked the remainder of his half-smoked cigarette into the fire and then lifted his hands above his head and slowly leaned back, toward Morrie. A slight hiss of pain escaped between clenched teeth. Now he leaned to his left, then to his right—gritting his teeth against the pain—while he tested his full range of motion.

Turning, now, so that he faced Morrie, their knees touching, he leaned forward and placed both hands on the other man’s shoulders. His face was so pale, and beads of sweat stood out all along the ridge of his hairline and down his thick sideburns. To Morrie, he said, “You did a fine job, Morris. I think you missed your calling in this man’s army. You should have been a medic.”

Shaking his head, embarrassed by the praise, Morrie said, “Far from a medic. I just pulled out some splinters, friend. Don’t thank me until you get the prognosis. Say, I never did get your name.”

“My name is Harrison,” the other man said. In the dim light of the fire, his eyes no longer appeared green or jewel-like, but a light brown or hazel. He took one hand off Morrie’s shoulder and, with some effort, put it in front of him, so that the two men could shake. “Frederick Harrison, at your service.”

Morrie shook the offered hand, gripping it firmly and pumping it twice, like his father taught him.

“Harrison.” The name seemed to roll off his lips, as though he were speaking in a dream. “You’re looking quite pale, Harrison. And very weak, but I think you’ll survive. When I first saw you out there, friend, I thought for sure you were done for.”

Harrison cracked a wan smile, his white teeth barely making an appearance. It was a weak, tired smile. “You see all that blood, it makes it look worse than it really is.” Now Harrison stopped smiling. He swiveled on his helmet—which he was using as a stool—so that he was facing the

fire now. “I did lose a lot of blood, though. I’m going to need some of that back.”

“How’s that now?” Morrie asked, not sure he heard correctly. He thought Harrison said he needed his blood back.

“Nothing,” Harrison said. He picked up his M-2 individual medical kit and tossed it to Morrie, who caught it easily with one hand. “Can you get me bandaged up, Doc? I’d like to rest a bit and get my strength back up before dawn. I’m feeling quite drained, actually.”

Morrie nodded his head and went about the task. He opened the canvas pouch and set out the gear, taking stock of what he had to work with, which was not much. He used the three gauze adhesive pads to strategically cover some of the smaller clusters of cuts and abrasions, saving the first aid field brown dressing for the larger wounds, including the hole from which he’d extracted the piece of branch. He was a bit confused using the dressing, at first. He had to squint in the dim firelight to read the packaging—“red color indicates back of dressing put other side next to wound”—before finally deploying it.

He stripped off his T-shirt, using his bayonet to cut it in half at the seams. Using one complete half, he covered Harrison’s back, placing it over the gauze and field dressing, before putting what was left of Harrison’s blouse back on, its purpose now to help hold all the bandages in place.

Now, Morrie focused on the knee injury, which he originally thought was much worse. Outside, he thought he saw bone protruding from a mound of exploded flesh. However, the wound now was just a deep gash of pulpy flesh. Morrie used the remainder of the shirt to dress the knee wound, tying it tightly around on itself and tucking the ends in so it would not loosen on its own.

After helping Harrison get comfortable beside the fire by leaning him in a slightly elevated position against the sloping wall of the cave, Morrie dumped several Sulfadiazine pills into his hand and offered them to Harrison.

“You should take one or two of these to stave off infection. If blood loss doesn’t kill you, infection might.”

Harrison wrinkled his nose like a child and shook his head. “I just need to rest and get my strength back.” Now he closed his eyes and let his head

rest against the cold stone. “You take first watch, Morris. Wake me in a couple of hours and I’ll spell you.”

Morrie watched him for a while before finally putting the pills back into the bottle and setting it down with the remnants of the medical kit. He should have pushed the issue of the pills—it was really for Harrison’s own good; infection was a killer out here—but he was also exhausted and not in the mood to argue with stubbornness.

He tidied up by putting the remaining supplies back into the canvas case before slipping back into his blouse. It was still damp, but it was also a bit warm, courtesy of the small fire. After retrieving his rifle, Morrie found a cozy spot several feet away from his resting patient and got as comfortable as he could, given the circumstances. Although the fire was small, it gave off enough heat to bring a sheen of sweat to Morrie’s brow.

Morrie closed his eyes for a moment, the fire making him think about home. Growing up, he loved the outdoors. His father, Albert Meridian, was quite the outdoorsman, and he often took young Morrie along with him on fishing and hunting trips. When he was thirteen, Father took Morrie to Alberta on Canada Day, the first day of deer season, and gifted him a Marlin 1884 rifle. They camped near the Canadian Rockies, and Morrie was enthralled with the abundance of wildlife all around them. From their campground, he saw lamb, ewe, elk, and a lone mountain goat, standing sentinel to the east.

Throughout the day, the men in their party took down their bucks, including Father. Morrie had fired his new Marlin rifle twice, in the direction of two deer, though he missed both shots on purpose. In the evening, in front of the blazing campfire, Morrie sat close, relishing the heat, as he listened to the men tell their tales of the day. The warmth of the fire and the droning of voices were so calming, that little Morrie started to doze…

“Morris, wake up,” Harrison’s voice came punching through his dream, out of the darkness. Morrie sat up suddenly, disoriented, expecting to see his father, but instead he saw Harrison on the ground beside him, his face ghostly white. His body was sheathed in sweat, yet he shivered. Morrie reached over to touch the man; his skin was cold to Morrie’s touch.

“You’re so cold. Let’s get you closer to the fire,” Morrie said.

Harrison shook his head. “There’s someone out there,” he whispered harshly. “Outside the mouth of the cave.”

Morrie got to his knees and closed his eyes, listening. After a moment, he opened his eyes. “I don’t hear anything.”

“But I can. And I tell you, there’s someone outside the cave.”

“Sounds are strange in here. Maybe you heard—”

“Damn it, Morris,” Harrison interrupted. “I can hear his breathing from here.”

He can hear him breathing? Morrie thought. He looked down at the other man for a long time, wondering if the loss of blood could have made the man delusional. After a while, he said, “You’re not well, Harrison. Why don’t you go back to sleep? You need rest.”

Harrison’s hand took hold of Morrie’s forearm. Again, although it appeared the man barely had the strength to sit up, his grip was strong. “Look at me, Morris. Look at my eyes.”

Worried that fever from infection was making Harrison delirious, Morrie looked at the man. His eyes—*they are green; how could I have thought otherwise?*—were wide and wild. Desperate. And beautiful, so beautiful.

“There is a German out there,” Harrison whispered harshly. With visible struggle, he managed to push himself into a seated position, so that he could lock eyes with Morrie. “If he finds us here, we’re good as dead. Do you understand?”

Morrie nodded, unable to look away from Harrison’s eyes, which again shone like emeralds in the pale firelight. Like green stars in his eye sockets. “There’s a German. We’re dead.”

“We’re dead if he finds us here. Pay attention, Morris.”

“We’re dead if he finds us here.”

“You have to capture him quietly and bring him here.”

“Capture him quietly,” Morrie said, his voice but a whisper now.

“Use your bayonet, not your gun. If he tries to shout, cut his throat. Don’t let him alert his patrol.”

“Cut his throat before he alerts his patrol.”

“Only if he shouts, Morris. I want him alive, if possible.”

“Alive if possible,” Morrie said. Mesmerized, he reached out toward Harrison, attempted to take hold of one of his jeweled eyes, but Harrison

weakly swatted his hand away.

“For Pete’s sake, Morris, bring that German here. Now. Move out, soldier.” Harrison slumped against the wall. He was clearly distressed, weakened to the point where even simple movements became difficult.

Without a word, Morrie stood and extracted his bayonet from the sheath on his belt. Unconsciously, with a flick of his wrist, he flipped the bayonet blade side down. Moving at a slight crouch, doing his best to keep silent, he kept repeating in his mind, alive if possible, alive if possible.

As if to reinforce the theme, Harrison said, “Alive, Morris. Bring him to me alive. He’s no good if he’s dead.”

That’s not what Sergeant Coley says, Morrie thought as he approached the opening. *Sergeant Coley says the only good German is a dead German. Why should this one be any different?*

In his mind, he again heard Harrison, *Alive, Morris. Bring him to me alive*. At the mouth of the cave, Morrie paused and waited, listening for any sound that might betray the unsuspecting German’s presence. In the darkness, he saw the red glow of the cigarette cherry, followed by an exhale of smoke.

Stepping out, Morrie was silent. He held the bayonet down at his side, and now he lifted it in front of him as he approached the enemy. The German soldier stood just feet away from the entrance, his thick overcoat covering his uniform. An MP40 submachine gun draped from one shoulder on a leather sling. He also wore a pistol belt cinched loosely around his waist, which held his holstered Mauser P08 pistol. The soldier took another pull on his cigarette, but before he could exhale, Morrie put the cold steel of the bayonet against his neck.

“Don’t make a sound or I’ll kill you where you stand,” Morrie said. His voice sounded cold and unrecognizable to his own ears.

“*Bitte töte mich nicht*,” the man said in German, though Morrie did not understand.

“Shut up,” Morrie whispered harshly. If the others from the German patrol were nearby, he would quickly find himself in quite a pickle.

Switching to the limited German commands that he’d learned from Sergeant Coley, Morrie said, “*Nehmen Sie die Hände hoch!* Put your hands up!”

The German complied immediately, and Morrie quickly disarmed him by taking the MP40 and slinging it over his own shoulder and stuffing the pistol into his belt. When the man tried to speak again, Morrie clubbed him on the back of the neck with the hilt of the bayonet and growled, "*Ruhig.* Quiet, damn it, or I'll gut you."

Now pointing with his other hand, Morrie indicated the man move in the direction of the cave entrance. When the man didn't move, Morrie prompted him by hitting him in the face with the butt end of his bayonet. At first, the German stared back at him, defiantly, but then flinched and started to move when Morrie raised the bayonet again.

At the mouth of the cave, the German started to panic. Whether he feared the darkness or confinement in the cave, Morrie wasn't sure, but the German became spooked. He turned and shoved Morrie aside and tried to make a break for it, but before he could get more than a few steps, Morrie plunged the bayonet into the man's shoulder.

The German screamed, and Morrie fell upon him, driving his face down into the ground, stifling him. He raised the bayonet and used the butt to club the German across the head, once, twice, before the man fell silent and his body grew still. For a few moments, Morrie sat astride the fallen man—his heart racing and his breathing hot and heavy—listening for the approach of the German's patrol. He held the bayonet at the ready, anticipating violence which, thankfully, did not come.

Several minutes passed before Morrie stood up. He grabbed the soldier's collar and pulled him over onto his back. His nose was busted up pretty good and his blood smeared across his mouth and cheeks, but he was breathing, which was a relief. After tucking the bayonet back into its sheath, Morrie got his arms under the unconscious soldier and dragged him into the cave. He was heavy, but Morrie managed to drag him over toward the fire, where Harrison still sat, propped against the stone wall of the cave.

Harrison looked at Morrie and said, "He's alive. Very good."

"How do you know? Can you hear his heartbeat from all the way over there?"

"Yes. Bring him closer."

Morrie paused a moment, wondering if Harrison was joking about hearing the man's heartbeat, before he finally grabbed the German's collar and dragged him toward the man with the green eyes. He dropped him

within arm's reach and said, "I think he was alone, but there might be others out there. They might come looking for him during the night."

"I'll hear them if they come." Harrison's attention was focused on the unconscious man. He dragged himself closer to the German and pulled open the top buttons of his overcoat. "He's an *Unteroffizier*, I think. A corporal."

"So, what do we do with him? He's bound to wake any time now."

"Use my boot laces to tie his hands and feet."

"We should just kill him. The only good German is a dead German."

"No," Harrison said, sharply. He looked up at Morrie, and his features softened. "We need him alive."

"Why do we need him alive? What use is he to us?"

Harrison paused a moment, considering. "We could turn him in to the S-2 in the morning. He's probably got good information they can get out of him. Maybe something that will help save some of our boys."

Morrie was quiet now, thinking about Sergeant Coley. He didn't want to face the man empty handed in the morning after screwing up something as simple as filling canteens. Sergeant Coley would be happy if he could take credit for turning over the German noncom to the battalion intelligence officer.

"Fine, give me your damn boot laces." Morrie shrugged the MP40 from his shoulder and dangled it in front of Harrison, who accepted it. "And you're taking watch for the rest of the night. I'd like to get back to the dream I was having."

Harrison nodded and went about the task of removing the laces from his boots. A few minutes later, the corporal was hog-tied. The man was beginning to regain consciousness. He started to stir and moaned a couple of times while his hands were being tied. Morrie was concerned about the German waking during the night; Harrison was still weak from his wounds, and the man might be able to overpower his ally. To assuage his fears, Morrie used a Morphine syrette to keep their prisoner sedated.

"There was no need for that. You could have just put a gag in his mouth."

Morrie ignored him—he was tired of Harrison telling him what to do and somehow making him do it even when he didn't want to—and finally settled back into his spot and went back to sleep, hoping to resume his

dream of hunting near the Canadian Rockies with his father. However, when he woke just an hour later, he thought he was trapped in the middle of a nightmare.

Chapter Seven

THERE WAS NO DREAM, ONLY DARKNESS, COMPLETE AND PURE. WHEN HE woke, he was sheathed in sweat from head to foot. His back was cramped and stiff from laying on the cold, hard ground. To get comfortable, he turned toward the fire…and tried to scream. Instead, he could only look on in horror, as Harrison looked up from the bitten neck of the German, his eyes shining like green stars and his cheeks covered with blood.

For a moment, the two men locked eyes, and then Harrison again plunged his teeth into the German, greedily suckling at the blood that poured from the torn artery. As Harrison fed, the corporal's eyes shifted to Morrie. His mouth opened, as if he were going to speak, then closed again. His body suddenly fell limp, his arms dangling, knuckles scratching against the dirt as his flesh was ravaged.

"Jesus Christ!" Morrie finally broke his paralysis and sprung up from the ground. He took a step forward and then stopped, unsure what he should do. He reached for his M1 and pointed it at Harrison. "What the hell are you doing? Stop that!"

Harrison paused his blood feast and looked at Morrie. His green eyes glowed like lanterns. "Put the gun down, Morris."

"No," Morrie said, though, against his will, he started to lower the M1. "What the hell are you, a monster?"

"I think you know what I am." Harrison stood now, ignoring the German's corpse, and walked slowly toward Morrie.

"Stay back!" Morrie tried to raise his rifle, but he could not. "Jesus Christ, you were drinking his blood!"

"Morris, I will not harm you. Please be calm."

The green eyes hypnotized him. He knew it, yet he could not look away. He stood motionless as the thing that called itself Harrison closed the

distance and stopped in front of him, placing one hand on Morrie's shoulder.

"Stay away from me, monster!" Morrie pushed away, falling backwards, attempting to create distance between himself and Harrison. "Stay away!"

"I intend you no harm."

He reached out to help Morrie to his feet but then paused when Morrie closed his eyes and began chanting, "Please, don't kill me…don't kill me… don't kill me."

Harrison sighed. It was unfortunate that Morrie had to wake in the middle of his feeding. He was quite saddened by Morrie's reaction, though he could not have expected him to react any other way. He was not naïve; he understood that the human psyche could only process so much and would react in any number of adverse manners once it reached its breaking point. However, he felt as though a bond of sorts had formed between them, and it hurt him that Morrie thought he would do him harm.

He could not stand to see his new friend curled up in fear. He wanted to put the man's mind at ease, but clearly this was not the time. On his knees, he took Morrie's face in his hands—he felt a stab of guilt when Morris tried to pull away from his touch—and said, "Morris, open your eyes. Look at me."

Morrie obeyed, although he tried to fight against the command. His eyes sprang open, and he looked into Harrison's eyes. Those eyes, glowing like uranium lanterns. "Don't kill me," he repeated.

"Morris, you will sleep, now."

"Sleep," Morrie whispered.

"You will dream happy dreams, and when you wake, you will not fear me."

"Not fear you…" Morrie trailed off. And before he realized what happened, he was asleep, dreaming of the Canadian Rockies and the blazing campfire.

Chapter Eight

AT DAWN, MORRIE AND HARRISON PACKED THEIR GEAR AND PREPARED TO leave the shelter of the cave to rejoin their respective units. Morrie was exhausted, both mentally and physically, and wanted nothing more than for this ordeal to end.

When he woke, Harrison was watching him. He'd cleaned the blood from his face, but Morrie could not forget what he'd witnessed last night: Harrison's face looking back at him, his cheeks smeared with blood, and those damn eyes piercing his soul.

He'd never been so afraid in all his life—not even when the mortars pounded down death and destruction all around him or when hot bullets whizzed past searching for flesh to render—than he was when he woke last night to find Harrison feeding on the damn German soldier. Strangely, now, in the morning light, he no longer felt the intensity of that fear; instead, he simply felt sickened.

Morrie shrugged his M1 Garand over his shoulder and winced at his sore muscles. As he collected his belongings, he couldn't stop himself from again looking at the dead German non-com. Harrison had moved his body during the night; it lay prone, but his face was turned away, so that Morrie could no longer see it. His hands, still bound with bootlaces, rested against his stomach.

He thought suddenly, *If that German had not come along, would I be the one lying there with my neck bitten and blood drained?*

When he finally looked away from the corpse, Harrison was still staring at him, those green eyes probing him, reaching in, trying to exert control.

Be careful, Morrie thought. *Maybe he reads minds.*

"I would not have fed on you, Morris. If the German hadn't come along, I would have found another way to replenish the blood that I lost, but I would never harm you."

"Jesus Christ, you do read minds!" He started to back away and tripped over his own feet, slammed against the stone, and almost fell on his ass.

"Calm down, Morris."

"How can I be calm? Huh? You…you drank a man's blood last night, and now you're reading my mind. Is that how you controlled me last night? Is that how you made me do what you wanted me to do?"

Harrison shook his head. "I can't read your mind, Morris. That is beyond my abilities. I simply intuited what you were thinking by the look

on your face."

"You can put me in a trance with your eyes and make me do what you want me to do, though, right? Why should I trust anything you say?"

"You have done me a great service." Harrison's face was no longer pale nor sweaty. He looked healthy, strong. He no longer looked the part of the monster Morrie saw last night. He looked like an ordinary twenty-year-old again.

"The blood…it refreshed you somehow," Morrie said, more curious than angry. "You looked like you were dying last night. Now, you look like you're ready to take on the entire German army."

"I would have survived, but without his blood, I would not have recovered this quickly."

"What are you? You're certainly not human."

Harrison shook his head. "I was once, a long time ago. Now, I am Strigoi. I suppose what you would call a vampire. My given name is Gheorghe Marinescu. I was born in the Romanian village of Marotinu de Sus in 1803, and…it was there that I transitioned in 1823, just before my twentieth birthday."

Morrie shook his head in disbelief. "Vampires aren't real."

"Yet here I am, my friend."

Morrie considered this. "So, what do we do now? Do you make me forget what I saw? Do you kill me to keep me quiet?"

Harrison laughed. "Morris, you are so dramatic. And also, pessimistic. Why should I do either of those things?"

"You're not worried I'll tell someone what I saw?"

"No."

"No? Not worried at all?"

"If you went back and told your sergeant what you saw here last night, what would he say?"

Morrie considered the question, though only briefly. He would never tell Sergeant Coley what he saw here today, not in a million years. And even if he did tell Coley, he knew what the man would say. "He wouldn't believe me."

"No one would. You saw what you saw with your own eyes, and you still don't believe it. There is no need for me to kill a good man, such as yourself, to hide a truth no one would believe. I am not a monster."

Chapter Nine

MORRIE AND HARRISON FINALLY LEFT THE SHELTER OF THE CAVE, WHERE they'd spent the long night. The sun was still low in the sky, and a cooling breeze caressed them as they stepped out into the clearing. Morrie stood at the base of the stream. Both canteens were across the way, one on the bank and the other in the stream where he'd dropped them last night. Sergeant Coley was going to dress him down, and he was not looking forward to it.

"Say, Harrison, I never asked what company you're—" Morrie started to say but stopped when he looked at Harrison. Through the torn shirt, he saw smooth flesh where there should have been scarred flesh. Morrie reached out and pulled one of the dressings from Harrison's chest. Not a mark or even a scab.

"Well, I'll be damned. You're indestructible."

"The Strigoi are able to heal, provided they get enough blood to replenish their cells, but we are certainly not indestructible." He caught himself smiling at Morrie's amazement.

"What the hell you smiling at?"

The smile fell from Harrison's face, not because of what Morris said, but because he suddenly caught wind of the enemy. He should have heard them sooner, but he was distracted by Morrie's childlike wonder.

As Harrison started to raise his weapon—the MP40 Morrie liberated from the dead corporal during the night—the four-man German patrol broke cover from a copse of trees and opened fire, spraying them with automatic gunfire.

"Take cover!" Harrison shouted, stepping in front of Morrie. The first bullets tore into his chest, arms, and thighs. He stumbled back a step or two before regaining his balance. He jammed the skeletal metal butt of the MP40 against his shoulder and returned fire, killing two of the enemy before emptying the submachine gun's magazine.

Throwing down the useless weapon, Harrison sprang forward with shocking speed—covering the ten-yard distance between him and the remaining two Germans in the blink of an eye—and slammed his shoulder

into the first man, sending his body hurtling through the air, where he slammed against the knotted base of an enormous pine.

Quick as lightning, Harrison struck the second German in the chest, his fist pushing through the soldier's sternum, severing his spinal cord, and exiting his back. Harrison watched for a moment as the German convulsed involuntarily, before he finally plunged his fangs into the man's neck, tearing the artery and spilling hot blood into his gaping, suckling mouth.

Having drained the German of his healing blood, Harrison used his other hand to push the corpse backward, and at the same time, he slid his arm out of the gaping hole in the man's chest cavity. The body made a disgusting sound when it hit the ground, like the sound of a deer slamming into the side of an automobile. The scent of blood was thick in the air; to Morrie, it was nauseating.

Harrison turned and stalked toward the closest body, a young German boy—no more than eighteen—bleeding out from gunshot wounds to his belly. On his knees beside the young man, Harrison grabbed the boy's head in one of his hands and turned his face to the side, exposing the throbbing artery. Harrison let out a guttural sound before tearing into the flesh. The boy tried to scream, but Harrison crushed his windpipe, stifling him forever. He drank the hot blood as fast as it poured from the severed veins, swallowing in great gobs.

On his feet again, he started toward the soldier he'd flung into the trees but halted when he heard Morrie call out to him, his voice but a whisper, but loud enough for Harrison's ears.

"Stop it, Harrison, please, stop."

Drunk with blood, Harrison stood indecisively for a moment, his nostrils flaring and his chest heaving. His eyes flickered toward the fallen man for a moment—the glorious scent of blood still in his nostrils, the coppery taste still on his tongue—then he looked down at his blood-covered hands.

Again, Morrie spoke—"Please, no more!"—and finally, with greater restraint than he thought he possessed, Harrison turned away from the blood and carnage and instead went to his friend.

Morrie lay on his back, his left leg and arm resting in the shallow creek. His blouse was covered with blood from wounds left by bullets from the German small arms. His face was pale, and tears streamed down his cheeks.

He looked at Harrison when the man knelt beside him. His bright green eyes stared out from his blood-covered countenance.

“Please don’t do that.” Morrie took Harrison’s hand. “They’re the enemy, but they’re just boys, like me, fighting for their country. Let them die with dignity, not in that horrible way.”

“I am sorry. It has been many years since the bloodlust took hold of me…I wish you had not witnessed that. I truly am the monster you say that I am.”

“No! A monster would not have stopped.” Morrie coughed, and his stomach clenched with pain. He was growing cold from loss of blood.

Harrison pulled open Morrie’s blouse and examined the wounds. Two bullets tore into his abdomen, one near the spleen. Two more bullets caught him in the torso, but they were high, closer to the shoulder. He was not a medic, but he knew Morrie was losing a lot of blood, too much blood.

“You’re dying, Morris. You are losing far too much blood.”

“Take me back to our lines. Don’t leave me out here.”

“You won’t survive that long.” Harrison paused a moment. “I can help you, Morris.”

“Take the pain,” Morrie said eagerly. “Use your eyes to take away the pain. Please.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Harrison continued to grip Morrie’s hand. “Let me make you like I am, Morris. Then you can heal yourself. Then you can live forever, like me. Let me give you immortality.”

Morrie shook his head. Tears ran down his cheeks. “I can’t be what you are. I don’t want that. Just take the pain from me and let me die easy.”

“You saved me, Morris. Please, let me give you this gift.”

“No, I’d rather die.”

Harrison looked down at his friend and felt a great sadness. He’d known Morris for only several hours, yet he knew this was a good man—unlike any he’d ever met before—and there were far too few men like him in this world. Over the century, Harrison witnessed the great evil of which men were capable. Now, in Morris, he witnessed compassion, even for men who were his adversaries. Within this man was a goodness, a pureness, that needed to be shared with the world, which Harrison could not allow to die this day.

He released Morrie's hand so that he could lift his friend into his arms, placing one arm around his back and the other under the crook of his knees.

"Close your eyes, Morris. We're going to move very fast, and you may become sick if you do not keep your eyes closed."

Morrie did as he was told, without having to be compelled. He felt so cold and weak, barely able to lift his arm around Harrison's neck. His belly was on fire, the pain rushing in and blocking out everything around him. He just wanted the pain to go away; nothing else mattered right now.

"Hold on, Morris. I'm not going to let you die, friend," Harrison said, and then he ran like the wind.

Chapter Ten

TECHNICAL SERGEANT GONZALEZ STEPPED OUT OF THE SURGICAL TENT around 0600, in desperate need of a break after a long night of assisting with surgeries. The last surgery—a gruesome leg amputation—finished just minutes ago, and he needed some fresh air and a moment of quiet to gather himself. The boys paid a heavy toll to take that damn hill, and he hoped it was worth it.

Gonzalez pulled off his surgical mask and gloves and threw them onto the ground, kicking them aside with his boot. He took a seat on one of the large supply crates stacked outside the surgical tent and sighed; after standing for twelve hours straight, his back and feet needed relief. After a few moments, he lit a cigarette and closed his eyes, enjoying the cool breeze against his sweaty skin.

"We need a surgeon now!" the voice growled suddenly, seeming to come from nowhere.

Startled, Gonzalez jumped up from the crate and let out a yelp of surprise. In front of him stood two men covered in blood, one holding the other in his arms. One second, they weren't there and the next they were, as if they'd appeared by magic.

"*Dios mio*," Gonzalez said, making the sign of the cross. "Where the hell did you come from?" He'd almost pissed himself. He had to look down at his trousers to make sure he hadn't.

“No time for that. Look at me.” Harrison waited until the other man made eye contact, and then he said, “This man needs emergency surgery right now or he will die.”

“He needs surgery, or he’ll die,” Gonzalez said without realizing he spoke. He flicked his cigarette into the dirt and pulled open the tent flap. “Get him in here, hurry. We need a surgeon, stat!”

Harrison followed the technical sergeant into the surgical tent. There were six or seven gurneys on the left, atop each a wounded soldier—hooked up to plasma drips and various other intravenous contraptions—recovering from various surgical procedures. A couple of nurses were organizing surgical instruments on a tray, probably in preparation for their next run. The doctor, a pale, thin man in his late forties, was sitting at a small table looking over paperwork when the men entered the tent. He stood when Gonzalez called out.

“What is this? I wasn’t notified we had incoming.”

“They just came out of nowhere,” Gonzalez said. “We have multiple stomach and chest wounds. He’s lost a lot of blood. He needs a surgeon now, sir, or he will die.”

“Get him on the table. Nurses, prep for surgery. Gonzalez, get me some vitals, stat.”

While the doctor went to scrub in, Gonzalez and Harrison set Morrie’s unconscious body onto the table. The two nurses scurried to begin prepping for the doctor. As soon as Morrie was on the table, Gonzalez started to check his vitals, getting a blood pressure reading and pulse.

“BP is 100 over 15, and pulse is thready, sir.”

The doctor was scrubbing up over two large white bowls of water; his hands and arms were soaped to the elbows, and he worked a small brush in circular motions over his skin until his flesh was pink.

“Start a plasma drip,” the doctor said to Gonzalez. He looked up when Harrison approached and said, “Please step outside. Only the surgical team is allowed in the tent during surgery. We’ll take good care of your friend. He’s in good hands now, soldier.”

Harrison reached out and took the doctor’s face in his hands. “Look into my eyes, doctor. You will not let the man on that table die. You will use every trick you know to save his life. You will operate on him as though you are operating on your own child. Do you understand?”

“I will operate on him as though he were my child,” the doctor repeated.

“Very good, doctor. Now save his life so that I won’t have to take yours.”

Chapter Eleven

MORRIE GASPED FOR AIR, AS THOUGH HE WERE DROWNING, AND TRIED TO sit up in bed. Horrible pain throbbed in his left temple, where Harrison’s fingers pressed against his flesh. His eyes sprang wide open, and he no longer had the confused look on his face. In fact, he looked more alert than ever.

Harrison stood and took a step back from his friend. He stared at him for a moment, allowing Morrie to gather himself. “Do you remember, Morris?”

Morrie stared at him for a moment, until he was able to catch his breath. His hands were trembling, and sweat broke out across his furrowed brow. “Yes, I remember. I remember it all.”

“You were in surgery for more than two hours, but Sergeant Gonzalez and Dr. Horowitz were good, and you made it through with flying colors.”

“The doctor said he operated on me as though I was his own child,” Morrie croaked, his voice still a hoarse whisper.

Harrison smiled. “I wish I could have been there when you woke, but my company pulled out that morning and we took the hill. I did inquire after you as soon as I could. They told me the war was over for you; you’d been shipped back to the States.”

“It was a long recovery. But it was at the hospital where I met the woman of my dreams and we were married just a year later.”

“And your beautiful daughter, Meredith, was born just nine months later.”

Morrie looked at Harrison quizzically. “How did you know about Meredith?”

“I’ve looked in on you from time to time, in between my travels. I was in Greece when I learned of your wife’s passing. After my return from Rome, I learned that Meredith and her husband died in the automobile

accident. I was heartbroken over your losses. I wish I could have comforted you in your time of need, my friend."

Morrie was silent again. When he finally spoke, his poor voice was barely a whisper, though Harrison could hear him clearly. "Why come now? Why not then, when I could have used a friend?"

"There was nothing I could do then, for your wife or child. It was already too late when I learned of those tragedies. But there is something I can do for you, now."

Silently, Morrie stared back with sunken eyes. The soft sound of the oxygen feeding through the tubes in his nostrils filled the empty silence in the room.

"Do you remember what I offered you, Morris, beside the creek as you lay dying in my arms?"

Tears began to stream down Morrie's cheeks. He breathed deeply before he finally whispered, "Immortality."

Harrison nodded, and again a broad smile spread across his face. "And now, all these years later, I offer it to you again, my old friend. Let me take away your pain. Let me take your suffering. Let me give you back your life."

"Will I be a man of twenty again?"

Harrison chuckled. "No, my friend, I do not have that power. But you will have the strength of twenty men of that age."

"Well, that's…a deal breaker," Morrie whispered and cracked a wan smile.

Harrison laughed, delighted the man could still find humor, even while on his death bed.

Morrie was again silent. He continued to shed tears. He realized what a gift he was being offered, but in his heart, he knew he could not accept. Yet the generosity of the offer was not lost on him.

Reaching out, Morrie took Harrison's hand. Even that small movement exhausted him.

"Thank you…but I…cannot accept." Morrie's voice was fading, and his breathing had become more deliberate and quick. "I've lived…a good… life. I married…and loved…the woman…of my dreams. I was…adored by…my daughter…and never wanted…for anything. I'm ready…to move on…to whatever's next."

Harrison continued to hold Morrie's hand. His friend did not have much time. He could hear the faint thud of his heartbeat slow as his blood pressure plunged. His hands were cold, just like Harrison's.

"I understand, my friend, and I truly respect your decision." After a pause, Harrison said, "Since that day I met you, Morris, you changed me. You surprised me with your compassion, and you made me want to be better in every way. You have been my conscience these many years, and you will continue to live on in me, with me, and through me for as long as I walk the earth."

Morrie opened his mouth to speak, and with great difficulty, he spoke his last words, a final request. He continued to weep, as he used the last of his strength to briefly, weakly, squeeze Harrison's hand.

Leaning forward, Harrison looked deeply into Morrie's eyes. He said, "I will do as you ask, Morris. But now, you'll feel no more pain. Your wife and child are waiting for you in the heavens. Go to them, Morris. Be at peace now, my friend."

And with that, Morrie closed his eyes, took one final, shuddering breath, and then he was gone. Harrison continued to hold Morris' hand, surprised he was suddenly overcome with grief. He felt deep sadness stabbing at his lifeless heart, like he'd not felt before. After a moment, he let go of his friend's hand and reached into the pocket of his suit jacket. He retrieved a Moleskine notepad and pen and proceeded to honor Morris' last request.

Chapter Twelve

MERRILL STEPPED OUT OF THE ELEVATOR WHEN THE DOORS OPENED, AND immediately her worst fears were realized. The paper cup of hot peppermint tea she held in her petite hands slipped from her grip, falling straight down onto the tiled floor, where it first splashed its contents upward, then fell onto its side, the dark liquid spreading across the tiles. Before Merrick could reach out to her, she was already running toward Grandfather's room, where a handful of hospital staff were converging.

"Merrill, wait," Merrick called out, too late. He froze for a moment, as if he were unsure what to do. He noticed the trash can beside the elevator,

shoved his coffee cup into it, and then took off down the hall after his sister, who reached the room first, pushing past a nurse to gain entrance to Grandfather's room.

Pausing just several feet within the room, Merrill stood and watched in stunned silence as the doctor shut off the oxygen machine. The sound of the flatline on the machinery bore into her ears, into her head; thankfully, one of the nurses quickly silenced the machine, and a pall fell across the room.

Merrick stood beside her, his arm around her shoulder. Together they watched from the doorway as the hospital team quietly removed the tubes and wires and machinery from their grandfather, freeing him from their tangled grip on him.

After a while, the nurses left, and the doctor paused to tell them to take as much time as they needed with their grandfather. When they were ready, arrangements were already made to release Grandfather's remains to the funeral home in preparation for his service, as outlined in the last will and trust of Morris Meridian.

Finally alone with their grandfather, Merrill and Merrick went to him, hand in hand. It was now just the two of them against the world. Already, they felt the void left in Grandfather's wake.

Although still a shadow of his former self, Grandfather looked more like the man they remembered, now that the tubes and wires were gone. Merrill thought he looked at peace, finally, and that was some consolation.

Stepping forward, Merrick folded down the blanket so that he could hold his grandfather's hands. Morris' arms were folded against his body, his hands resting one over the other on his chest. Beneath his hands, Merrick saw what appeared to be a sheet of folded paper. He gingerly plucked it from beneath his grandfather's hands.

"What is that?" Merrill asked, looking up at her brother through tear-filled eyes, her interest piqued.

Merrick's hands trembled as he unfolded the two sheets of cream-colored paper. He studied them for a moment and then said, "It's a letter from Grandfather, but it's not his writing."

"Let me see." Merrill accepted the pages from her brother. Immediately, she saw it was, indeed, not written in her grandfather's hand. She looked around the room, wondering who had left the note.

"Read it," Merrick said.

Merrill looked at her brother again, and then she began to read the letter aloud.

Dearest Merrill and Merrick,

It is with great sadness that I dictate this letter, my final words to my beloved grandchildren. I wish that I could have spoken with you both directly. I wish I could have had more time with you both. I have completely enjoyed the time that we did have together, and I hope you will remember and cherish those moments as much as I have. I absolutely adored you both and will miss you terribly.

Merrick, you have grown into a fine young man, right before my very eyes. I have no doubt you will make me proud in how you continue my legacy as the new head of my businesses. You will have the best and brightest men and women in your employ at your disposal. Listen to their advice, but always trust your heart to do what is right.

Merrill, my dearest flower, you have bloomed into such a fine young woman. I hope you will find true love, have many children, and grow old gracefully with the man of your dreams. You deserve that life and so much more. My last dream was a memory of you as a little girl. In my dream, you ran to me, and I took you into my arms, and lifted you into the air and spun you around. The complete and utter joy I saw in your eyes filled my heart with enough love to last a lifetime. You must share that joy with the world.

To both of my dearest grandchildren, I leave you all my wealth and possessions, everything I have worked for and built over my lifetime. You will both never want for anything. You will have more money and power than you could have imagined. All I ask is that you do good with these gifts I have left for you both.

I will be with you always, in mind and spirit. Do me proud in this life and I will long to see you in the next. I will patiently await you on the other side, with Grandmother and your parents, when we can all be whole again.

I trust that you will do as I ask, however, should you disappoint me, you will be visited by an old friend, an ageless man named Harrison. I hope you will never meet him.

Love always,

Your grandfather,
Morris

THE BLACK REGENT

Matthew R. Davis

Josie had heard about the Black Regent, of course. An old Art Deco theatre that had sat disused and derelict for decades without being touched by the spate of urban remodeling going on all around it, the Regent was the kind of place that bred eerie rumors amongst the local kids, the kind that doomed teenagers would flock to in the slasher flicks Josie loved. So, when Warren approached her in the horror aisle of Magellan Video and asked her to come to the Black Regent after he closed up shop for the night, she didn't brush him off straight away.

"Man, I love this shit," he said by way of introduction, running a fingernail along the DVDs from H to J, each movie another vertebra in a long and colorful spine. This much had already been made clear by conversations he and Josie had shared at school or parties—his lack of self-assurance was less obvious when discussing his favorite films, his voice louder, his eyes and hands alive with passion. "Argento, Carpenter, Nakata,

Flanagan—they're like my saints. But amazing as their movies are, they're just…ideas. Fake fantasies—a passive experience, you know? But the real stuff's out there. You just have to know where to look."

At first, Josie only wanted him to make his point and go away. Her homework had taken hours to kill, and all the while she'd been looking forward to devouring a slab of chocolate as she watched bloody deaths on a thirty-six-inch screen—any more obstacles between her and those things, and she might just turn to murder herself. But here was something new: Warren was wearing a confident smile that flattered his narrow face, unfazed by her lack of enthusiasm. His eyes held hers without dropping or cutting away, and he didn't fidget with his phone or his floppy hair.

"I know a place, Josie, and it's the scariest thing I ever saw. You want to come take a look with me?"

"Huh?" Josie's eyebrows shot up on their own accord—was shy Warren suddenly asking her out, and in public, no less? "Be kind and rewind, dude. What did you just ask me?"

"I know it sounds weird, but it's legit, I promise. I found something incredible, and I've been wondering who the hell I could ever share it with—but you'd be perfect, Josie. You're not like everyone else. You'd get it."

A little disturbed by the new intensity in Warren's eyes, Josie glanced around the ailing video store, the last of its kind in the area. A half-dozen people were wandering the aisles or placidly watching looped previews of new-release pablum on wall-mounted screens, and none of them looked anything like her; here as much as anywhere, she felt like a black rose planted in a garish plastic bucket. She needed more from life than these drones—demanded diversions and adventures, and the more reckless and ill-advised, the better. Maybe that was why she didn't dismiss Warren's weird overture out of hand; was why she could already feel her apathy giving way to genuine interest.

"You know how amazing this scary thing of yours would have to be for me to even think about going off into the night with a guy I hardly know?"

His eyes lit up as if he'd caught a faint hint of consent. "Oh, believe me—this is the shit. Josie, trust me on this. I swear you won't regret it. Will you come?"

"I don't know. When were you thinking?"

“Why not tonight? It’s like ten past ten now—I finish my shift and close up in twenty minutes. What do you say?”

Josie and Warren saw each other at school all the time, exchanged words probably every week, and so far, no red flags had popped up to warn her away from him. He seemed mellow, vaguely cool, but appearances could be deceiving; Josie was barely eighteen, but many years had passed since she’d decided that all humans were just slime molds with pretensions to civilization. So, what was the worst this one could do? Frames of carnage from her favorite films flashed across the silver screen in the back of her mind, but she dismissed these possibilities in a heartbeat. Her gut feeling was that Warren was harmless, and if her anatomy was mistaken…well, he wouldn’t be the first guy to regret crossing her.

“What is it, then, this terrifying place of yours?” she asked, and Warren told her, smiling as if he’d been rolling those three words around in his mouth with relish. Josie felt a chilly tingle of curiosity in the back of her head and knew that this was where anyone with common sense would politely decline.

“Okay,” she said.

JOSIE HUNG AROUND UNTIL WARREN CLOSED MAGELLAN VIDEO AND THEN followed his motorbike across the eastern suburbs to the Black Regent. She parked her Laser GL in a quiet cul-de-sac behind his Honda and joined him on the footpath, where he stood staring across the road like a tourist

returning to his favorite monument. Her eyes were drawn to the dark bulk that loomed on the other side of the street, and a tickle of morbid fascination goosed her heartbeat. She had to admit that Warren was right—this was totally the sort of thing she vibed on.

"Well, Miss Hughes. Ready for the thrill of a lifetime?"

"I'm warning you now," she said, lighting a cigarette. "You try and pull something funny on me, and you'll regret it."

Warren raised his hands in supplication. "Nothing creepy, I promise. Well, it's gonna be creepy, but not in that way."

"Fine, let's go," she prompted. "It's getting late, and I want to watch my movie before I crash out."

"Ah, yes, *In the Mouth of Madness*. Girl's got taste."

The tall fence keeping the Regent closed off from the footpath wore drapes of morning glory vines as if to discourage the curious, and the one gate she could see was pointedly chained shut. Josie hoped Warren didn't expect her to clamber over it, but instead, he pulled at a clump of leaves and lifted it like a flap of ragged flesh. A gaping maw interrupted the diamond pattern of fence wire beneath, and he beckoned Josie through before closing the gap behind them.

Straightening, Josie saw that they were now standing in a disused drive that ran down the side of the old two-story theatre. The Regent loomed over them like a black ship on the night tide, and she felt a delicious twinge of apprehension.

"So where do we get in?"

"Around the back," Warren murmured. "And you might want to keep your voice down. We are trespassing, after all."

"Oh, great. You might have mentioned that we'd be breaking the law."

"Where's your sense of adventure? Come on, this way."

Josie shadowed him as he crept around the nearest corner of the building, his head turning from side to side as he went. Surely no one was watching, and yet she couldn't help but feel like they'd walked onto the set of a play such as the Regent had seen hundreds of times over—the theatre a one-sided shell, the moon a pale disc pinned to a black drape of sky above. Warren moved past a loading dock, where a heavy door sat stolid and impassable in the wall four feet off the ground, to a busted window at the back of the building.

“Here.”

Josie looked around the deserted, rubbish-strewn car park behind them. All was cloaked in shadow, so anything could have been lurking back there and watching, licking its lips in anticipation of following them in. When she turned back to Warren, he was disappearing through the window into darkness. A flap of cardboard dangled after him from one taped corner, the glass broken and cleared away long ago.

“Your turn.” A pale claw pushed out through the cardboard. “Here, take my hand.”

“Keep it. You may need it.”

“Ha, ha.”

His fingers remained outstretched, and Josie began reaching for them. A sudden vision burst like a flare inside her skull: Warren pulls her through the window, throws her to the floor inside the pitch-black theatre, springs onto her quick and savage. An hour later, he leaves. Alone.

She shrugged. *Let him try and see how far he gets.* She tossed her cigarette into a rusted barrel, then reached for his hand. With Warren’s help, she clambered awkwardly through the window and dropped to the floor inside. When she was standing steady, he let go and stepped away from her.

Good boy.

By the moonlight creeping in through their point of entry, Josie could see that this room was full of broken junk. It smelled of mildew and must, of rust and neglect. Warren was barely visible, and only now did she realize that he had pulled a black sweater on over his work shirt to blend in with the dark. She supposed he would have just as much difficulty seeing her—her wardrobe came in all colors as long as they were black, and her dark red hair faded into the night like bloodstains on a funeral dress. All anyone else would see of them was ghostly faces and pairs of equally pale hands floating along beneath them.

But there’s no one else here, right?

“Well, we’re in. Now what?”

Warren’s teeth gleamed in the moonlight. “Now I fill in the back story. There’s a terrible tale to tell, and when I’m done, you can either hop back outside or continue the tour.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll scare my socks off. Come on, then.”

Josie heard Warren rubbing his hands together in the dark. “Okay. So, the Black Regent was one of two Art Deco theatres built around these parts back in 1934. However, my tale doesn’t truly begin until 1972.”

“So instead of spirits in period dress, we’re talking ghosts in high-waisted flares.”

A snort of amusement from Warren. “No.”

Josie’s mouth ran away from her, as if trying to hold back the heavy atmosphere with the reassuring sound of snark. “Oh, I know! There was a murder spree, and the killer comes back on every anniversary to bump off horny teenagers…and it’s tonight.”

Warren sighed. “Do you mind not interrupting my monologue?”

“Sorry. Go on.”

“Thank you. Now, the owner of the Black Regent in 1972 was Joseph Buller, who’d made his name on the stages of London’s West End. When he retired, he moved to Australia to enjoy his twilight years—but an artist never really retires, does he? Buller ended up buying the Regent cheap and installing a projection booth so he could screen films, which was how he kept the place afloat, and he scratched his dramatic itch by directing a local acting troupe.”

“Someone’s been doing their research.”

“You’ll see why. One of the actors was a woman called Margaret Bachelor. I’ve seen some pics, and she was a total hottie—but by all accounts, a dreadful actress. Despite this, Buller gave her the female lead in his last play, *Thumbs Dug Deep*.”

“He was probably shagging her.”

“I think our mate Joe was one of those old theatrical queens, but who knows? Apparently, he liked his murder thrillers—*Thumbs Dug Deep* was about a strangler stalking young women on a cruise ship.”

Josie gave a low whistle of appreciation. “Tonight’s feature presentation: *Titanic*, starring Leonardo DeSalvo.”

Warren snorted out a laugh, then covered his mouth as if embarrassed—or as if he didn’t want to be heard.

“In the second-last scene, Margaret’s character discovers the captain guiding the ship off course, and he strangles her to death. After that, the other survivors realize he’s the killer, he gets shot by a vacationing cop, and

he falls over the side. Sharks have been following the ship because of the bodies he's been dumping, and they eat him."

Josie grinned. "Wow, morbid. I'm so gonna Google this later."

"Max Kellum, the guy playing the captain, was a renowned method actor whose career was going off the rails—emotional issues, erratic behavior, basically an alcoholic by this stage. Buller gave him the role as a favor, hoping he'd pull his head in. Margaret had a bad feeling about their showcase scene, but Buller swore to her that everything would be fine."

"Ominous much?"

"Oh, yeah. Come opening night, the play runs like clockwork, right until the big reveal. Margaret walks in and sees what Captain Max is doing, so he chokes the life out of her. The curtain goes down for scene change, and the audience is left buzzing about the unexpected twist, the shockingly intense strangling…and the fact that Ms. Bachelor has finally delivered a convincing performance."

Josie nodded, knowing exactly where this was going.

"Unfortunately, that's all they ever got to see of *Thumbs Dug Deep*. As you can guess, Margaret was playing dead far too well to be acting. Everyone knew that Max was going through a nasty separation from his wife, but no one realized the depth of his depression or the amount of drugs he was taking to deal with it."

"Actors on drugs? The mind boggles."

"During the trial, Kellum admitted to being off his face on a cocktail of narcotics, said that once he got Margaret's throat in his hands, all he could see was his wife, and it made him so angry that he just…squeezed."

"Lovely."

"Buller took it hard, blamed himself. He was wracked with intense guilt and grief, spent his days wandering the halls of this very theatre like a lost man. Eventually, his friends got worried and checked him into the hospital."

"A mental hospital?"

"Nope. No one thought Buller was crazy until the next day, when the nurse came in and found something…horrible."

Silence followed this proclamation, until Josie realized that he was waiting for her to ask. "Okay—what did he do?"

"He'd bitten off his own tongue, chewed it, and swallowed it."

“Ouch!” Josie sucked in a pained breath. “Really? Is that even possible?”

“Apparently. They decided to pack Buller off to the loony bin, after all. But as he was being transported there, he got out of his restraints, bit a nurse on the face, and made a break for it. They never caught him. Joseph Buller disappeared into the shadows of history.”

Josie waited for the next delicious detail, then realized he’d reached the end of his spiel. “Oh. And that’s all, is it?”

Warren smiled. “No way. So, shall we begin the midnight tour?”

“Hang on!” Josie protested. “What’s all that got to do with tonight? Does Buller live here or something?”

“No one is living in this building, Josie. What’s your decision? Will you go, or will you stay?”

She took a deep breath—not to fight fear, but rather her irritation with Warren’s mysterious manner. Or perhaps she was just nettled by the way he’d hooked her so easily with that story.

“I wouldn’t give you the satisfaction of watching me back down.”

“Excellent!” Warren rubbed his hands together again, pleased. “Let’s move on, then, shall we? The door is right here.”

Something rattled and scraped at Warren’s side. Peering through the dim, Josie saw him sliding a moth-eaten curtain along its rail, revealing a decrepit-looking door. With a jolt of unease, she saw a line of pale, jaundiced light along the bottom edge.

“Is someone else here?” she asked, sharp as a blade.

“Ssshh!” Warren turned to her fast, finger at his lips. “From here on in, be very quiet. If you absolutely must say something, whisper it.”

Josie felt the first pangs of anxiety. Up to this point, she’d been vaguely concerned about cops or security catching them in here—but now they were about to head out into a lit corridor inside a derelict building, whispering to each other to avoid detection.

Detection by what?

Probably a couple of Warren’s friends, lurking in wait to lurch out and frighten her. Then she’d realize the scam and yell at Warren, who’d offer her a drink to calm her down…and that was where she said yes and they hung out and got tipsy and then she let him kiss her, right? She’d noticed the way he sometimes looked at her from across a room—his keen eyes

undercut by the wrought line of his mouth, like he wanted to speak bold truths to her but didn't dare.

He's certainly dared tonight, and I've gone along with it—so what else might he now be brave enough to try?

"After you," she said.

There came a portentous creak from aged hinges as Warren eased the door open, and Josie heard a sharp intake of breath. Either he was a good actor, or he really didn't want to be heard in here.

The hallway was only dimly lit, but the fact that anything could be seen at all this late at night was alarming. Josie peered down the corridor and saw why: here and there, someone had screwed old candles into disused lamp casings—and lit them.

"Warren," she whispered. "Did you do this?"

He grinned and shook his head.

"Then who's here? Tell me!"

He winked, then pointed to the right and started creeping in that direction. With an uneasy mixture of curiosity and dread washing around in her gut, Josie followed as quietly as she could, which wasn't as quietly as she'd have liked. The carpet had been torn up, and the old wooden floor puffed dust from creaky lips. Chunks of debris lay wherever they had fallen, unnoticed, and the discolored walls ran up to a high ceiling that was lost in shadow. Every one of those candles was a risk, Josie realized—this place was an inferno waiting to happen.

The long hallway curved all the way around into a once-grand foyer. Josie saw a couple of illegible tags spray-painted on the aged wood, so they weren't the first to visit this place in its phase of dereliction, but she was surprised that the graffiti was so minimal; it wasn't human nature to trash one area when there was a whole building just begging for it. The walls had suffered some damage, though—they were scuffed all along at shoulder height, and here and there, gashes and scratches defaced the paneling in close-knit groups. Near the front of the theatre, they passed a flight of stairs accompanied by a grand banister, and Josie guessed that these led up to a mezzanine level, perhaps even balconies. The steps looked firm, but she felt disinclined to trust them under her boots after forty-odd years of neglect.

As they walked, Josie pondered the passing of time and the inevitable shift of paradigms. This theatre had offered stage shows and then films,

until both had been surpassed in popular taste by home entertainments; the young man walking beside her worked in a store that had helped push the Regent into its grave, providing videotapes and laser discs and then DVDs and Blu-rays, but now that, too, was receding into redundancy thanks to online streaming services. Sure, there would always be an audience for stage and screen, just as some people would always prefer physical media, but some things would inevitably be lost in the shuffle—including institutions like the Black Regent. Looking around her now, Josie couldn't quite bring herself to regret that loss. In its decay, the old theatre offered a different type of entertainment, delights that she could never find in any brightly lit and well-maintained venue or on such a small canvas as a thirty-six-inch screen.

They came into the foyer together. More candles—a dozen points of light flickered gently in subtle draughts that found their way in from outside. Looking about, Josie could see paler patches on the walls where paintings had been hung, and the shell of a deserted cafeteria off to one side.

"Cool, isn't it?" whispered Warren. That cocky gleam was back in his eye, his anxiety hidden away—and yet the fact that he knew this place well, had been here before and was still nervous, kept Josie on edge.

"It has a certain ramshackle charm," she admitted, strolling toward the dust-choked cafeteria. "But I assume it's not the décor that's giving you the willies."

"What? No way. I'm the one who gives the willies, baby."

Warren was cracking wise to show he was unafraid, but the joke fell flat, its lewdness unconvincing in the oppressive atmosphere. Josie peered into the dim cavity where people had once sat and picked at meals, quaffed wine, tried to seduce each other. If that last was what she'd believed Warren's intention to be, then no longer; the hollow ring to his humor had put an end to that.

"Very nice," she murmured. "What's with all the candles?"

"There's a storeroom full of them backstage. I guess they were used as props or stockpiled in case of a blackout or something."

"So, who's been lighting them?"

"If we're lucky, you'll see soon enough."

Josie sighed and dropped that line of questioning for now. “Fine, be all mysterious, then. Is it okay if I take some photos?”

Warren shrugged, so she slipped her phone out and took some quick and grainy snaps of the darkened foyer. She imagined the kind of creatures her favorite movies would have lurking in these surrounds and looked forward to dreaming of them later. Josie was the kind of girl who kept a journal about her nightmares, who turned them into abstract poems and wondered if this was the voice by which the world would come to know her. She had to do something, right? Half her classmates were already grinding away behind supermarket checkouts or fast-food counters in preparation for their future labors, and still she searched for a better option. University, perhaps —but then what?

She shook such thoughts away for now. In this place, her mind should be on the shadows of the past, not the mists of the future.

“Right, done. So, what’s the next stop on the tour?”

Warren bowed and gestured with one arm to a set of double doors that gave way to the auditorium.

“Josie Hughes, tonight’s the night you make your grand debut on the stage of the Black Regent.”

STANDING ON THE STAGE WHERE A WOMAN HAD BEEN STRANGLED WAS BAD enough—but staring out at rows upon rows of empty seats made Josie feel even more anxious, as if an invisible audience was waiting to watch it

happen again. None of those disquieting candles burned in the auditorium, and she could see no farther than the first row of dilapidated seats; beyond that, the cavernous chamber stretched out beneath a cloak of darkness, and every sound she made sent back a mocking echo. She wanted to pull out her phone and dispel the febrile shadows with sterile digital light, but Warren had insisted she not, whilst still refusing to give a reason.

A series of wooden creaks approached her across the stage. *Warren's treading the boards*, she thought and could easily imagine him coming out of his shell in the glow of the footlights, twirling a pantomime villain's moustache and chewing the scenery with relish.

"It's so creepy up here," he whispered when he reached her side, and then he startled her by articulating her own thoughts. "Knowing that a murder was committed right at our feet…and feeling like the crowd is still here in the darkness, waiting for an encore."

"For sure," she agreed. "I think I've had enough adulation for one night. Where now?"

"We exit at stage left and go to the dressing rooms."

The impression of being watched abated once they were backstage, but only until Josie realized that the dilapidated hallway was aglow with flickering light, more candle stubs crammed into rusted sconces and ignited to show the way. The ability to see again was a comfort, but then, someone had been here tonight to light these wicks. The thought didn't sit well with her, especially when Warren muttered, "We've got to be careful now."

"Why?"

"We're close."

"To what?"

He shook his head, unwilling to surrender his secret just yet. Instead, he pointed at the nearest wall, where three rusty lengths of rebar leaned against the sour, peeling plaster.

"They're still here. That's good. Grab one."

Josie's stomach pickled. "You expecting a fight?"

"It pays to be careful."

Fantastic, she thought and wrapped her hand around one of the rods. She imagined what it would do when laid across someone's head at full force and felt just that little bit safer. Warren hefted one of the other makeshift clubs, remembering the weight.

“Let’s move on, but keep it quiet,” he whispered. “Tell me if you see anything strange.”

“Like what?”

He let out a quiet, cracked laugh. “You’ll know it when you see it.”

Josie swallowed a lump of nerves. “Warren, you’ve got me seriously spooked now. If some of your mates are back here in monster masks waiting to jump out at me, you better say so now. You win, okay? I’m freaking.”

His response—a squeeze of her free hand and a wan grin—wasn’t quite as reassuring as she’d hoped. “If anything happens, just make sure you stick with me. I know this place inside out.”

The two of them crept along the hall, wincing every time a creak called out through the silence to give them away. Josie flexed edgy fingers around the rebar, ready to lash out at a moment’s notice. She was tempted to belt Warren for bringing her here and getting her so worked up, but why? He’d only made the suggestion; it was she who’d said yes. Once again, her impetuous nature had dumped her into a dubious situation and left her more circumspect side to pick up the tab.

Not one of the dressing room doors was closed. They gaped like lazy mouths, or else lay flat on the floor, asleep at their posts. Josie peered into each one on the way past, half-expecting to see corpses sitting before the dull-eyed mirrors, applying flaking make-up to skinless faces…but the rooms seemed empty of anything bar dust, broken light bulbs, and mouse turds.

As they passed the fourth door, Josie saw a faded, five-spoked shape on the wood where a star must once have hung. She looked in, immediately noticing that this room’s dusty floor had been marked by passing feet—and now, glancing back along the corridor, she finally saw that the same disturbances ranged all along its length. She hadn’t spotted them before because she’d been walking straight up the middle of the hall. Whoever else had been here liked to move close to the walls.

“Look!” she blurted and then flinched as one of the wardrobes in the fourth dressing room burst open. Josie sucked in a shocked breath that froze in her throat.

It came out of the wardrobe with arms outstretched, its fingers distorted into claws, its jaw working fast and loose around choking gasps of need.

The sheer horror of it shattered Josie's reason at once, reduced her to shivering, mindless prey. She squealed like a burned baby and back-pedaled into the corridor, her heartbeat a hammer in her head.

"Run!" Warren yelled, high and thin, as he pushed her along the hall.

Josie threw a frenzied glance over her shoulder as they pelted away, and there was nothing to be seen—almost as if there never had been. As they ran, she tried to convince herself that she'd imagined it, or that one of Warren's friends was back there in the dressing room shaking with laughter beneath clever prosthetics, but she couldn't believe those deadly delusions for a second.

She looked back again, and this time it was shockingly there, out in the hall and shambling swiftly along the wall toward them. Its clothes had rotted away to rags, revealing a hide that had mummified in a most bizarre way, but it was the face that convinced Josie of its awful authenticity—that, and the soft clicking sounds spitting from its horrible maw.

She wanted to scream, but she could barely breathe, her lungs frozen in terror. Her head spun from the lack of air and her boots collided with each other, bringing her crashing down to the groaning floor. Warren grabbed her with a shout, but she was already lurching to her feet, sucking in a long moaning breath that almost drowned out the wretched gasps of the thing at her heels. Sensing those gnarled nails reaching for her streaming hair, Josie ran faster than she'd ever believed herself capable.

Trapped in that one moment, teetering on the cusp of capture, she had no idea how long they sprinted down that long and winding corridor, her perception of time and distance swamped by the cold ecstasy of terror. Her sweaty fingers clutched at the useless rebar as if letting it slip and fall would bring her the same fate, and she dared not look back to see how closely death shadowed her.

Warren snapped her back into focus by pulling her sideways onto a set of dusty wooden stairs that disappeared up into a candle-free darkness.

"Up here!"

Josie flung a desperate look back, saw the nightmare had receded far enough to give her a dash of hope and reason. "Where are we going?"

"Projection booth."

The steps groaned but held firm under their pounding feet. Josie tripped and stumbled upwards in the darkness, panting hard and fast like a stallion,

and was relieved to hear a door opening beneath Warren's hand. He shoved it closed after her, and then they were sealed in the pitch-black projection room, the only sound that of their ragged breaths.

"What the fuck is that?" she gasped.

Warren gave a strangled laugh and said, "I think that's Joseph Buller."

Josie replied to that with a string of breathless profanities that ended abruptly when Warren put his hand to her mouth.

"Ssshh!"

She almost gave him a thump with the rebar, then subsided against the door and listened, hearing nothing now but the furious kick drum of her heart.

No—wait—

A slithering step. And another.

Warren dropped his hand from her mouth to free her voice, and his own was straining under the pressure of anxiety. "It's coming up."

"Lock the door!"

"There's no lock."

"Then where do we go?"

"There's a fire escape. Come on!"

They hustled across the room, their eyes beginning to adjust to the blackness; Josie barely managed to avoid the looming bulk of an antique film projector, a stream of spoiled film dangling from one reel and brushing her cheek like a spider's web. Then Warren came to an abrupt halt, and Josie plowed right into him.

"Ouch! What's that?" Josie heard his hand sliding over a rough surface in the dark. "Oh, shit. There's something blocking the door!"

"What?"

"I don't know! It wasn't here last time!"

"Hang on!" Josie rummaged in her pocket, caught her phone in a slippery grip, and managed to get it right way up, one finger triggering the screen. The sudden brightness stabbed at her eyes in the dark, and she kept them narrowed as she opened her flashlight app. Warren looked grim in the backwash of light.

"Um, brace yourself."

"Huh?"

Josie’s phone glowed twice as bright, showing her the projection room clearly for the first time. The chamber was small and cluttered with dusty junk, and the object blocking the door was a waist-high wooden crate—but her eyes flew straight to the rust-red spray of dried blood on the pale wall behind Warren, and the two semi-devoured corpses slumped at its foot. She shrieked and jerked backwards, her finger reflexively stabbing the screen and killing the light.

“I don’t know who they are,” she heard Warren say in the fresh darkness as he dragged the crate aside. “Someone else who got curious, I guess. There are a couple more of them around the place.”

He stood up straight, his foot striking a loose object that rolled across the invisible floor with the unmistakable metallic rattle of a spray can. Then the other door clicked open, and those choking gasps were mere yards away, and Josie could have sworn they took on a tone of triumph.

She whimpered and jerked toward the fire escape door, stumbling into Warren as he wrestled it open. Behind them, those slithering footsteps closed in. Josie looked back and saw a twisted black-on-black silhouette shambling across the all-too-small projection booth.

A grunt of relief, and suddenly Warren was gone. A gasp of pure terror wrenched itself from her throat, and Josie flung herself out into the night after him. The cool breeze swept across her fevered face as the fire escape clanged beneath her boots, blowing her to the left, toward the steps that led down to safe ground.

And then Warren’s arms wrapped themselves tight around her, pinned her to his shaking body. Josie’s breath was squeezed from her lungs by the sudden embrace, and the rebar fell from her spasming hand into the darkness.

NO!

It was a trap all along—

“Look!” Warren gasped into her ear.

Josie stared down at the fire escape gantry and saw that her foot was dangling over empty air. The rusted steel stairs had broken away from the platform and toppled to the ground thirty feet below, a skeletal spine bracketed by ribs of twisted steel. Her rod clanged against it and skittered away out of sight.

Pulling them both away from the edge, Warren reached back with one hand and shoved the fire escape door shut. No sooner had the old latch clicked into place than they heard those gnarled claws scratching at the other side, a sound of frantic hunger. A thrill of terror shot down Josie's spine, and she flashed on those bodies again, two sexless, limbless lumps of ravaged grue and bone, broken ribs caging nothing, tongueless mouths forever screaming—

"Over there," said Warren. He had one foot planted against the door and was leaning back against the railing to brace himself. Catching Josie's eye, he nodded at the other end of the fire escape. She dropped to all fours, scurried beneath his outstretched leg, and found a knotted rope, dangling down from the gantry into the night.

"Ladies first, but please make it quick."

For a few seconds that felt so much longer, Josie thought she wasn't going to be able to do it—thought she would hunch here frozen in panic until the door burst open and their death fell spitting and clawing upon them. That got her legs swinging over the edge, her stomach reeling as she tipped forward and the ground loomed up at her. Then she was dropping, and her panicked hands clutched for the nylon rope. She was sure that her sweaty fingers would fumble the grab and leave her plummeting to the ground below, but they were determined, and clutched the rough strand as if it were life itself. Her thighs clamped shut around the rope, and there Josie hung like a spider cursed with vertigo, thirty feet above the unwelcoming earth.

"Hurry!"

Josie let her thighs relax and kicked at the rope until her frantic foot found the nearest knot. With a deep breath and a wish, she began inching her way down, not letting one hold go until she'd found the next. She discovered it was much easier with her eyes closed.

"Move, Josie, now!"

She heard feet thumping on the fire escape above, heard Warren's rebar clatter on the old gantry, and then the rope swayed roughly to one side as he grabbed hold and swung aboard. The fire escape door burst open with a grating screech.

"Shit!"

She somehow managed to move even faster, and Warren was so close behind her that he almost kicked her in the head. She looked upwards and waited for his feet to jerk as the thing grabbed him and pulled him back up, but all he did was swear repeatedly under his breath as they descended. Then she saw a silhouette at the railing, moving across the pale face of the moon like some ghastly, choking eclipse—toward the place where the rope was tied.

Josie looked down. Maybe a dozen feet to go.

Oh, fuck it.

She dropped, crying out as she fell, then landed hard on both boots and was dashed furiously into the dirt, feeling the breath explode out of her like she'd been gut-punched. She rolled weakly onto her side, gasping for air and choking on dust instead. Curled up and clutching at her numb feet, she heard Warren plummet to the earth beside her. They lay that way for a few seconds, hacking, moaning, sobbing in shock.

When Josie remembered why they'd fallen, she rolled onto her back and stared up through tears at the metal gantry. A dark shape hung over the railing up there, and she couldn't make out any details no matter how fast she blinked away the wet blurs, but she knew it was looking down at her. It didn't move, just loomed over the rail and stared with horrid, sunken eyes that she was so glad she could no longer see. The moment it showed signs of pursuit, she would scramble to her poor feet and fly, but until then she was frozen, locked in a staring match she dared not lose.

After a minute that seemed like an eternity, the shadow finally withdrew. Footsteps shuffled across the fire escape, and the door was dragged shut with a definitive clang.

And then, silence.

More silence.

Then: "Warren?"

A groan. "Yeah?"

Josie sat up, wincing at a half-dozen potential bruises, and stabbed at him with one quivering, accusatory finger.

"That…was the fucking scariest thing that's ever happened to me in my entire fucking life."

Warren moaned and rolled up onto his butt, a hint of that new confident grin sneaking back onto his dusty face. "Told you so."

Josie fumbled in her coat, found her battered pack of cigarettes. “God damn. Want one?”

“Usually, no. Right now? Hell, yes.”

They smoked in silence for a while, trying to catch their breath, pin down their equilibrium.

“You think that was him?” Josie asked, when her voice sounded almost normal again. “You really think that was Joseph Buller?”

Warren nodded. “Makes sense when you think about it. You hear those sounds it was making? I reckon that’s what a person might sound like if they had no tongue.”

“But there’s no way he’s still alive!”

A shrug. “Buller was old when he vanished, and that was over forty years ago. And judging by the way he looks, his face…yeah, my money’s on dead. He’s pretty frisky for a corpse, though, isn’t he?”

Josie nailed him with a gaze. “And you asked me to go into that place all unaware, knowing that thing is in there waiting to kill and eat us.”

Warren grinned. “Hell of a rush, isn’t it?”

“I thought I was going to die! That was the most intense thing ever!”

As one, they both looked up at the empty gantry.

“I’m going in again,” Warren said. “Soon.”

He dragged on his cigarette, butted it out on the ground that had broken his fall, and turned to Josie. Now she knew why his eyes gleamed with a newfound confidence—death had nipped at his heels, and in that terror, he’d discovered a new perspective on life. How scary could school be, could the rejection of a girl be, when he had that experience by which to measure his fears?

“I’ve done this four times now, and every run is different—that thing is reacting, learning. It’s even setting traps for me now! But I love the challenge—running, fighting for your very life, it’s so fucking hardcore. And as it turns out, it’s even more fun with someone else.

“So, Josie Hughes…what have you got planned for the weekend?”

She looked up at the wreck of the Black Regent, then across at his face. He waited for her response, no nerves now, and his smile said he already knew the answer. Josie recalled the rapture of terror she’d known inside the old theatre, the hit of pure adrenaline that had carried her along mere seconds ahead of a hellish end, and felt her own lips curve up to mirror his.

“Nothing I can’t cancel,” she said.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Scotty Milder is a writer, filmmaker, and film educator living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He received his MFA in Screenwriting from Boston University, and his award-winning short films have screened at festivals all over the world, including Cinequest, the Dead By Dawn Festival of Horror, HollyShorts, and the H.P. Lovecraft Film Festival and CthulhuCon. His independent feature film *Dead Billy* is available to stream on Google Play. His short fiction has appeared in Dark Moon Digest #40, as well as anthologies from Dark Peninsula Press, Sinister Smile Press, Soteira Press, AM Ink Publishing, DBND Publishing, Fantasia Divinity Press, and Gypsum Sound Tales. Scotty also co-hosts The Weirdest Thing podcast with actor/theatre director Amelia Ampuero. Find out more about Scotty at www.scottymilder.com.

Elana Gomel is an academic and a writer. She has published six non-fiction books and numerous articles on posthumanism, science fiction, Victorian literature, and serial killers. Her stories appeared in *Apex*, *New Horizons*, *Mythic*, and many other magazines, and were also featured in several award-winning anthologies, including *After Sundown*, *Apex Book of World Science Fiction*, and *People of the Book*. Her story "Where the Streets Have No Name" was the winner of the 2020 Gravity Award. She is the author of three novels: *A Tale of Three Cities* (2013), *The Hungry Ones* (2018) and *The Cryptids* (2019). She has lived in four countries, speaks three languages, and has two children. She is a member of HWA. Find out more about Elana at www.citiesoflightanddarkness.com.

Hannah O'Doom is currently working toward her Master of Library Science at the University of Kentucky at night, while working as a project manager by day. When not writing stories about robots, cats, or magical coffees, she can be found playing roller derby with her team Roller Derby of Central Kentucky,

drinking gin and tonics, reading odd books, and eating Indian food. Find out more about Hannah at www.hannahodoom.com.

Scott Harper was inspired to write by the works of authors such as Marv Wolfman, John Steakley, and Bram Stoker. His stories combine aspects of horror and dark fantasy married with comic book action. Scott has been fortunate enough to have his prose published in a number of speculative fiction venues, including Sinister Smile Press's *If I Die Before I Wake, Volume 3*. He is honored and thrilled to be included with the talented pool of authors assembled for Volume 4. Learn more about Scott at www.scottharpermacabremaestro.com.

Bridgett Nelson is a former registered nurse who has not-so-secretly wanted to write since her teen years. Her story, "Political Suicide," is featured as part of the horror anthology, *If I Die Before I Wake, Volume 3*. She also contributed the final chapter/epilogue to a collaborative horror story, *Devil's Gulch*. She lives in West Virginia (Go Mountaineers!) with her husband, Doug; her teenagers, Parker & Autumn; her three pugs, Bodhi, Harlow, and Dexter Morgan (named after the infamous character portrayed by Michael C. Hall), and her frequently aroused, 180-pound St. Bernard, Sal—who has WAY more followers on Instagram than she does. Bridgett enjoys writing because wearing a bra is not required. You can learn more about this goofball at www.bridgettnelson.com.

Brian Asman is a writer and editor from San Diego, CA. He's the author of *I'm Not Even Supposed to Be Here Today* from Eraserhead Press and the forthcoming novella *Jailbroke* from Mutated Media. He has recently published short stories in the anthologies *Breaking Bizarro*, *Welcome to the Splatter Club*, and *Lost Films*, and comics in *Tales of Horrorgasm*. An anthology he co-edited with Danger Slater, *Boinking Bizarro*, was recently released by Death's Head Press. He holds an MFA from UCR-Palm Desert. He's represented by Dunham Literary, Inc. Max Booth III is his hype man. Find him

on Instagram or Twitter (@thebrianasman), Facebook (brian.asman.14), or his website www.brianasmanbooks.com.

Sandra Stephens is a writer living in the Pacific Northwest. She delights in making people uncomfortable. Find out more about Sandra at www.reliablyuncomfortable.com.

Henry Herz earned a bachelors degree in engineering from Cornell University, a masters in engineering from George Washington University, and a masters in political science from Georgetown University, none of which help him write fiction. He's been a fan of fantasy since reading (and re-reading) Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* in elementary school and *The Lord of the Rings* in middle school. He became an author when he wrote a fantasy chapter book to interest his young sons in that genre. The experience unexpectedly awakened Henry's dormant passion for writing. He has since traditionally published eleven children's book titles and twenty-four traditionally published short stories, including five for SFWA-qualifying markets. He lives in San Diego with his wife and two sons. He loves dogs, trees, and Boston Creme Pie. He makes wisecracks on social media and hosts a blog at www.henryherz.com.

R.E. Sargent is the author of several novels, as well as a handful of novelettes. R.E.'s novels include *Relative Terror* and The Fury-Scorned series. At a young age, R.E. fell in love with books. While many of the other kids were playing sports, he was reading as many books as he could. He quickly got hooked on mysteries and suspense. It was his love of books and storytelling that led to his passion for writing. One of his biggest inspirations is Dean Koontz. R.E. currently lives in Oregon with his wife and their two fur-children, Riley and Mason. Riley is a Chocolate Lab and Mason is a Bernese Mountain Dog. Find out more about R.E. at www.resargent.com.

Red Lagoe is a horror writer and the author of *Lucid Screams*. When she's not spewing her horror-ridden mind onto the page, she substitutes at an elementary school and enjoys dabbling in amateur astronomy. Find out more about Red at www.redlagoe.com.

Frank Beghin is a University of Toronto graduate, married father of two, and a writer of literary fiction and poetry. He has been writing stories for as long as he can remember. Find out more about Frank at www.facebook.com/frank.beghin.

Kevin M. Folliard is a Chicagoland writer whose fiction has been collected by The Horror Tree, Flame Tree Publishing, The Dread Machine, and more. His recent publications include his 2020 horror anthology *The Misery King's Closet*; the *Short Sharp Shocks!* novella "Tower of Raven"; "Bumper-to-Bumper," published in the Jolly Horror Press anthology *Coffin Blossoms*; "Home by Dark," collected in Transmundane Press's *On Time* anthology; "Headless Viper," in *A Celebration of Storytelling* by Dark Owl Publishing; and the Christmas horror story "Season's Greetings," featured at The Dread Machine. Kevin currently resides in La Grange, Illinois, where he enjoys his day job as an academic writing advisor and active membership in the La Grange and Brookfield Writers Groups. When not writing or working, he's usually reading Stephen King, playing *Super Mario Maker*, or traveling the U.S.A. Find out more about Kevin at www.kevinfolliard.com.

Steven Pajak is the author of novels such as the U.S. Marshal Jack Monroe series and the Mad Swine trilogy, as well as short stories and novellas. When not writing, Steven works as an administrator at a university. He continues to be an avid reader of Stephen King and Dean Koontz, John Saul, Richard Matheson, and many other favorite authors in the horror, suspense, thriller, and general fiction genres. Steven lives in the Chicagoland area with his wife and two teens. Find out more about Steven at www.stevenpajak.com.

MATTHEW R. DAVIS is an author and musician based in Adelaide, South Australia, with around sixty published short stories to his credit thus far. He won two categories in the 2019 Australian Shadows Awards (Best Short Story and the Paul Haines Award for Long Fiction) and his work has been shortlisted for the Shadows and the Aurealis Awards many times. He plays bass and sings in alternative rock and metal bands like Blood Red Renaissance and icecocoon, occasionally performs spoken word shows with punk poets Paroxysm Press, and dabbles in video editing and basic graphic design. His first collection of short stories, *If Only Tonight We Could Sleep*, was published by Things in the Well in 2020; his first novel, *Midnight in the Chapel of Love*, will be released by JournalStone in 2021. Find out more about Matthew at matthewrdavisfiction.wordpress.com.

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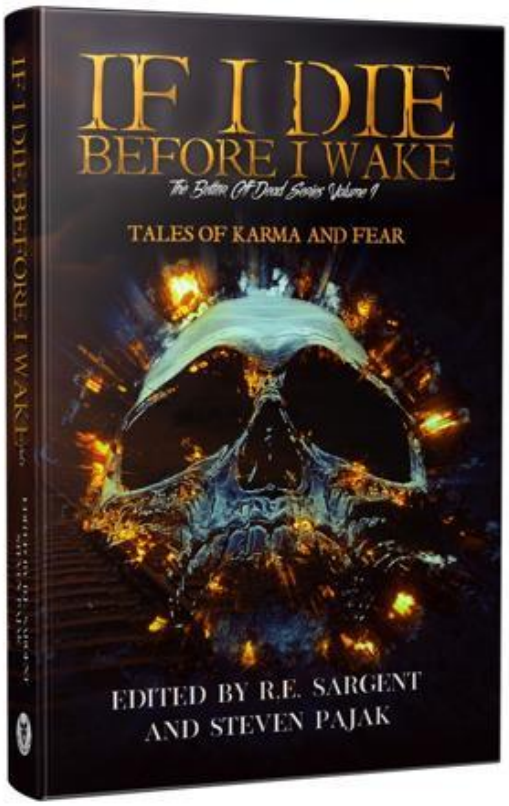

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Don’t deny it. Your mind has dwelled for hours on the things you would do if your name was Karma. Malevolence towards those that wronged you festers and there is no relief—until now. Plunge headfirst into these sinister tales where karma finally takes control and vengeance is a dish that is best served hot.

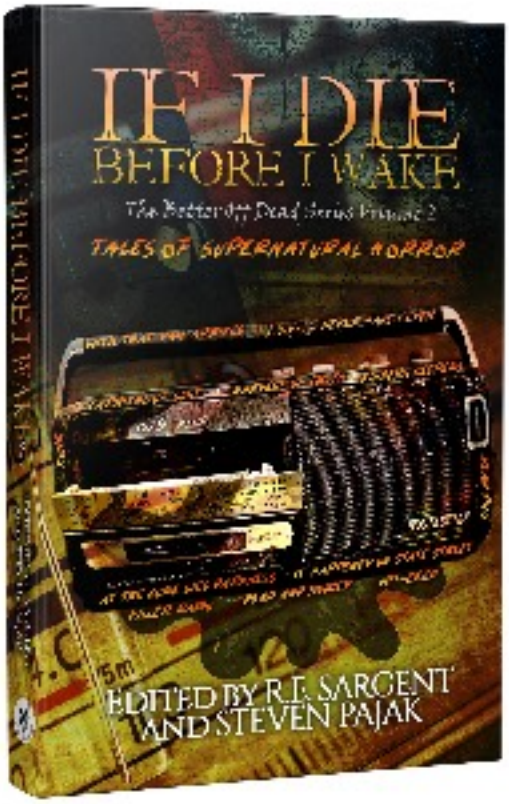
See what reviewers are saying about Volume 1.

“Dark and disturbing, this anthology was packed full of horrifying stories, which I could not stop reading! Ten short stories, ten shocking, creepy and macabre tales to haunt and thrill you! I would recommend this to horror fans, or someone who just wants to dip their toe into the genre. I hadn’t read any horror in years, and even then not that much, but I really enjoyed this collection of stories. Some characters I rooted for, some I truly detested, but one things for sure karma is gonna get them all! Now I’m going to go hide under a blanket…” *–preoccupiedbybooks on Goodreads*

“Excellent Set of Stories! It’s nice to take a break from full-length novels to jump from one shorter story to the next, and these were certainly a batch of stories to keep the reader on their toes. A nice combo of dark tales, and plenty to keep you reading into the wee hours!” *–Nettie, United Kingdom*

“You know what? Some people just need killing. This collection of revenge stories is pure awesome. Cheaters, bullies, and basic douchebags beware: Karma gonna get you…spectacularly. These stories tap into something so human and relatable in all of us because who hasn’t felt wronged? Like the lovechild of Stephen King and Quentin Tarantino, all grown up and ready to rumble, this collection exceeded all my expectations. I loved it.” *–Dita on Goodreads*

IF I DIE BEFORE I WAKE – VOLUME 2:
TALES OF SUPERNATURAL HORROR



Be afraid. Be very afraid.

That noise in the dead of night. The shadow that slips by almost unnoticed. The fear that pulverizes your sense of reasoning and pushes you deep down under seven layers of covers. There is no escaping it, and when the dark forces of the universe come after you, the world will know exactly what you are made of. Will you run? Will you fight? Maybe you'll join forces with the darkness that rips through your quiet little life. Everyone's dying to find out.

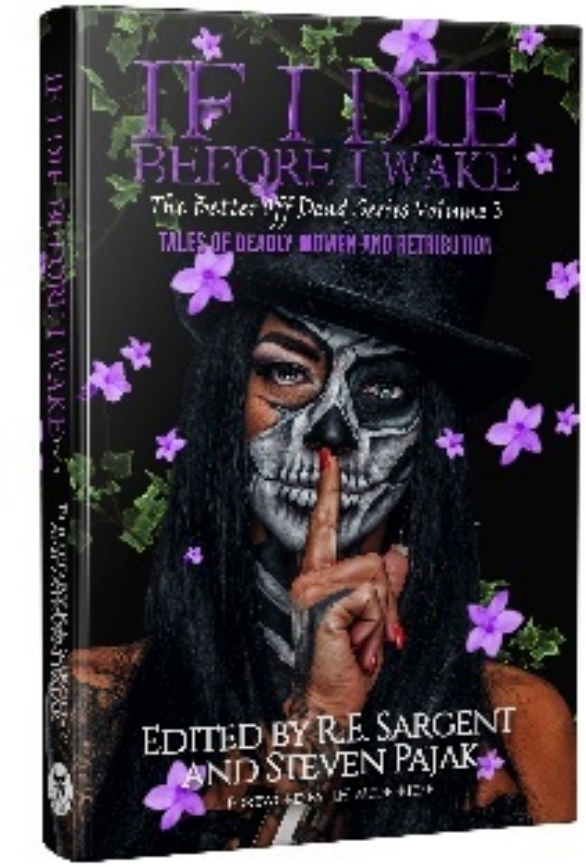
See what reviewers are saying about Volume 2.

“Awesome collection! I really enjoyed this collection. From the moment that I started I was hooked. This is the perfect read to escape to when you [need] a break from your everyday reality. The stories move along at a great pace. Each of them have interesting characters and you want to know more about them. The stories keep you turning pages. This book needs to be experienced, you will not be sorry.” *–Joy*

“I really enjoy this series. There hasn’t been a bad story in either volume. Each story is quite interesting. I’m already looking forward to vol 3. I highly recommend this book.” *–Michael on Goodreads*

“ONE EXTRAORDINARY ANTHOLOGY!!! Fantastic! This talented, impressive and compelling group of authors presents an electrifying approach, ratcheting up the thrill of the chase, fusing this gem together flawlessly.” *–Excerpt from Kaye on Goodreads*

IF I DIE BEFORE I WAKE – Volume 3:
Tales of Deadly Women and Retribution


IF I DIE
BEFORE I WAKE
The Better Off Dead Series Volume 3
TALES OF DEADLY WOMEN AND RETRIBUTION
EDITED BY R.E. SARGENT
AND STEVEN PAJAK

Go ahead, run. Hide, even. No matter. There's no place you can go that she won't find you.

A woman scorned. The sanctity of her sanctuary threatened. The betrayal of trust…even loyalty. Don't ever tell her not to take it personally, because that's exactly what it is. Personal. Your first blunder was mistaking her kindness for weakness. Your second was betraying her. The third?

Underestimating her. Don’t say we didn’t warn you. Take the plunge into these tales of deadly women who will stop at nothing until vengeance is theirs.

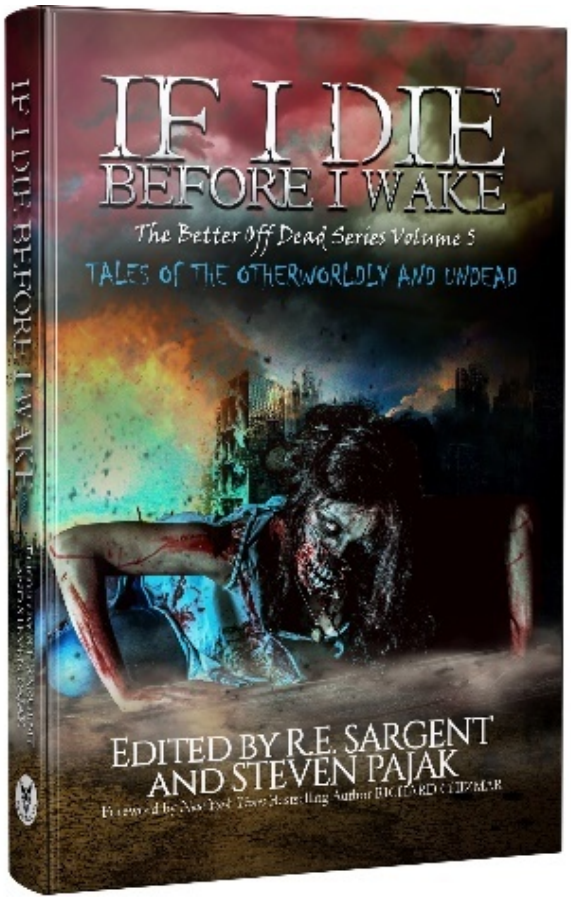
See what reviewers are saying about Volume 3.

“The cover art, the cover art. Thank you ‘If I die writers’. I had a really crappy week and you all just gave me a shot of adrenaline. These books are so…GOOD! Five stars. So, if you like good old-fashioned Horror, you HAVE to read this. Actually, read all the books in the series. There is nothing like Old school Horror, I must say.” *–Excerpt from BBooks*

“I loved this collection! I don’t normally read, or even like short stories. But this horror collection was just wonderful. Firstly, the stories are all about retribution - women getting payback for wrongs done to them or someone close to them. Then, they are all so different, so much variety and creativity on display.” *–Pat on Goodreads*

“Twisted Sisters. You may want to think twice before messing with the women in this book. They’re out for blood. Literally. Sixteen imaginative stories cover female empowerment of the murderous kind. Each is unique and arranged in a way that separates and enhances the differences.” *– Excerpt from High Heeled One*

IF I DIE BEFORE I WAKE – VOLUME 5:
TALES OF THE OTHERWORLDLY AND UNDEAD


IF I DIE BEFORE I WAKE
The Better Off Dead Series Volume 5
TALES OF THE OTHERWORLDLY AND UNDEAD
EDITED BY R.E. SARGENT AND STEVEN PAJAK

Sometimes, the dead do come back. Sometimes, they crave your flesh… and sometimes, they desire your very soul, but they aren't the only thing you have to fear.

You don't believe in what you can't see, yet something is there, watching, waiting. You can feel its unholy intentions deep down in the marrow of your bones. You don't know where it came from, but you know with every fiber of your being that it is not from this earth, and as you feel its gaze searing through your skin, you know the end just might be near.

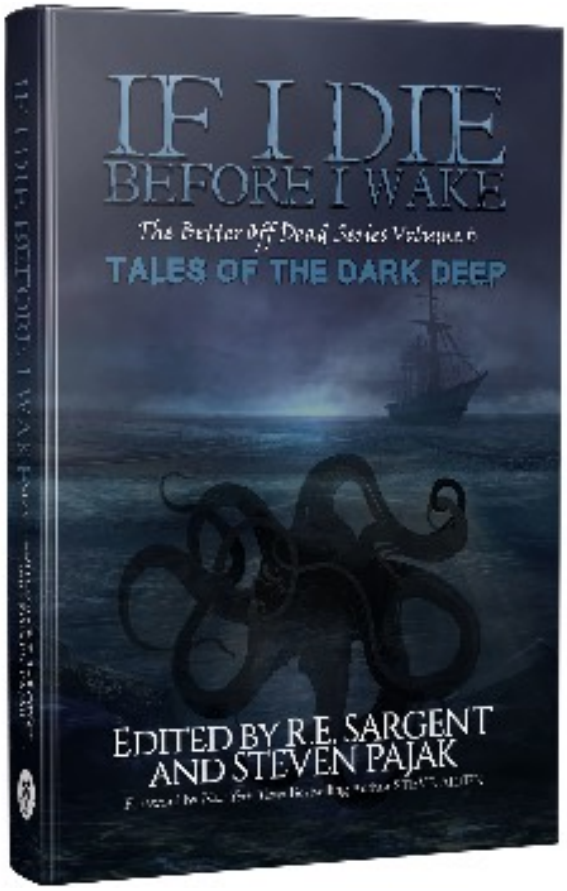
It took its last breath, you watched the dirt being shoveled onto its coffin, yet there it is, standing before you, staring you down like you're its next meal. It's vicious and it's evil and even though you know—you're absolutely positive—that the abomination before you should be dead, somehow it's not, and its ungodly eyes are focused on you.

The Otherworldly and Undead are out there and they are coming for you. When you run—and oh, will you run—you don't need to be the fastest… you only need to be faster than the person beside you—at least until there is no one else left. Join us for the most terrifying stories of Otherworldly and Undead beings as they stalk and torment the living, feeding off their souls and their flesh before recruiting them to eternal damnation.

With foreword by New York Times Bestselling Author Richard Chizmar.

Available June 14th, 2021. Preorder now!

IF I DIE BEFORE I WAKE – VOLUME 6:
TALES OF THE DARK DEEP



Don’t go in the water. It’s dark. It’s deep. It’s scary as hell.

There is no better keeper of secrets than the menacing, murky depths of the ocean. Unfathomable creatures, mysterious disappearances, abandoned ships, deadly pirates. Even experienced seamen are susceptible to the

horrors that lay hidden far below the surface. It’s all a game of chance. Be in the wrong place at the wrong time and you’ll become something’s meal. The dark deep is ominous and unforgiving and it has no conscience. Do you dare tempt fate?

With foreword by New York Times Bestselling Author Steve Alten.

Available December 6, 2021. Preorder now!